

Singers of the Soul:

Five Poets who Sing What Matters Most

July 10: Selections from Dylan Thomas

July 17: Selections from Robert Lowell

**July 24: Selections from Anne Sexton
and Sharon Olds**

July 31: Selections from Stephen Dunn

Tuesdays: 5:45-7:15

Jung Center Houston

July, 2012

James Hollis

Fern Hill

Dylan Thomas

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and
cold,
And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was
air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the
nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.

So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking
warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace.

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would
take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Dylan Thomas

A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death.
I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter,
Robed in the long friends,
The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother,
Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames.
After the first death, there is no other.

Dylan Thomas

In My Craft or Sullen Art

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art

Dylan Thomas

For the Union Dead

Robert Lowell

Relinquunt Ommia Servare Rem Publicam.

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the crowded, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sign still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half of the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is a lean
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;

he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die-
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic

The stone statutes of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year-
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns...

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his 'niggers.'

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statutes for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
when I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

Robert Lowell

The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket

*Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air
and the beasts and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth
upon the earth.*

I

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,-
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our north Atlantic Fleet,
when the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
He grappled at the net
With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs;
The corpse was bloodless, a botch of red and whites,
It's open, starring eyes
Were lusterless dead-lights
Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk
Heavy with sand. we weight the body, close
Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came,
Where the heel-headed dogfish barks at its nose
On Ahab's void and forehead; and the name
Is blocked in yellow chalk.
Sailors, who pitch this at the portent at the sea
Where dreadnoughts shall confess
It's hell-bent deity
When you are powerless
To sand-bag this Atlantic bulwark, faced
By the earth-shaker, green, unwearied, chaste
In his steel scales; ask for no Orphean lute
To pluck life back. The guns of the steeled fleet
Recoiled and then repeat
The hoarse salute

II.

Whenever winds are moving and their breath
Heaved at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,
Then terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death
In these waters. Sailor, can you hear
The Pequod's sea wings, beating landward, fall
Headlong and break on our Atlantic wall

Off 'Sconset, where the yawing S-boats-splash
The bellbuoy, with ballooning spinnakers,

As the entangled, screeching mainsheet clears
 The blocks: off Madaket, where lubbers lash
 The heavy surf and throw their long lead squids
 For blue-fish? Sea-gulls blink their heavy lids
 Seaward. The winds' wings beat upon the stones,
 Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush
 At the sea's throat and wring it in the slush
 Of this old Quaker graveyard where the bones
 Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
 Bobbing by Ahab's whaleboats in the East.

III

All you recovered from Poseidon died
 With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine
 Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god,
 Stretching beyond us to the castles in Spain,
 Nantucket's westward haven. To Cape Cod
 Guns, cradled on the tide,
 Blast, the eelgrass about a waterclock
 Of bilge and backwash, roil the salt and the sand
 Lashing earth's scaffold, rock
 Our warships in the hand
 Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
 Whatever it was these Quaker sailor's lost
 In the mad scramble of their lives. They died
 When time was open-eyed,
 Wooden and childish; only bones abide
 There, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed
 Sky-high, where mariners had fabled news
 Of IS, the whited monster. what it cost
 Them is their secret. In the sperm-whale's slick
 I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:
 "If God himself had not been by our side,
 If God himself had not been on our side,
 When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
 Then it had swallowed us up quick."

IV

This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale
 Who spewed Nantucket bones on the thrashed swell
 And stirred the troubled waters to whirlpools
 To send the Pequod packing off to hell:
 This is the end of them, three quarters fools,

Snatching at straws to sail
 Seaward and seaward on the turntail whale,
 Spouting out blood and water as it rolls

Sick as a dog to these Atlantic shoals:
 Clamavimus, O depths. Let the sea-gulls wail

For water, for the deep where the high tide
 Mutters to its hurt self, mutters and ebbs.
 Waves wallow in their wash, go out and out,
 Leave only the death-rattle of the crabs,
 The beach increasing, its enormous snout
 Sucking the ocean's side.
 This is the end of running on the waves;
 We are poured out like water. who will dance
 The mast-lashed master of Leviathans
 Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves?

V

When the whales viscera go and the roll
 Of its corruption overruns this world
 Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Wood's Hole
 whistle and fall and sink into the fat?
 In the great ash-pit of Jehoshapat
 The bones cry for the blood of the white whale,
 The fat flukes arch and whack about its ears,
 The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
 The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
 And hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags
 And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags,
 Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,
 Sailor and gulls go round the stoven timbers
 Where the morning stars sing out together
 And thunder shakes the white surf and dismembers
 The red flag hammered in the mast-head. Hide
 Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side.

VI

Our Lady of Walsingham
 There once the penitents took off their shoes
 and then walked barefoot the remaining mile;
 And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file
 Slowly along the munching English lane,

Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose
 Track of your dragging pain.
 The stream flows down under the druid tree,
 Shiloah's whirlpools gurgle and make you glad
 And whistled Sion by that stream. But see:

Our Lady, too small for her canopy,
 Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness
 At all or charm in that expressionless
 Face with its heavy eyelids. As before,
 This face, for centuries a memory,
 Non est species, neque décor
 Expressionless expresses God: it goes
 Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,
 Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem
 Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

VII

The empty winds are creaking and the oak
 Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,
 The boughs are trembling and a gaff
 Bobs on the untimely stroke
 Of the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell
 In the old mouth of the Atlantic. It's well;
 Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
 Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:
 Unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh
 Mart once of supercilious, winged clippers,
 Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil
 You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
 Here in Nantucket and cast up the time
 When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
 And breathed into his face the breath of life,
 And the blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
 The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

Robert Lowell

ANNE SEXTON

The Fury Of Overshoes

**They sit in a row
outside the kindergarten,
black, red, brown, all
with those brass buckles.
Remember when you couldn't
buckle your own
overshoe
or tie your own
overshoe
or tie your own shoe
or cut your own meat
and the tears
running down like mud
because you fell off your
tricycle?
Remember, big fish,
when you couldn't swim
and simply slipped under
like a stone frog?
The world wasn't
yours.
It belonged to
the big people.
Under your bed
sat the wolf
and he made a shadow
when cars passed by**

at night.

They made you give up
your nightlight
and your teddy
and your thumb.

Oh overshoes,
don't you
remember me,
pushing you up and down
in the winter snow?

Oh thumb,
I want a drink,
it is dark,
where are the big people,
when will I get there,
taking giant steps
all day,
each day
and thinking
nothing of it?

Anne Sexton

Unknown Girl In A Maternity Ward

Child, the current of your breath is six days long.
You lie, a small knuckle on my white bed;
lie, fisted like a snail, so small and strong
at my breast. Your lips are animals; you are fed
with love. At first hunger is not wrong.
The nurses nod their caps; you are shepherded
down starch halls with the other unnested throng
in wheeling baskets. You tip like a cup; your head
moving to my touch. You sense the way we belong.
But this is an institution bed.
You will not know me very long.

The doctors are enamel. They want to know
the facts. They guess about the man who left me,
some pendulum soul, going the way men go
and leave you full of child. But our case history
stays blank. All I did was let you grow.
Now we are here for all the ward to see.
They thought I was strange, although
I never spoke a word. I burst empty of you,
letting you see how the air is so.
The doctors chart the riddle they ask of me
and I turn my head away. I do not know.

Yours is the only face I recognize.
Bone at my bone, you drink my answers in.
Six times a day I prize
your need, the animals of your lips, your skin
growing warm and plump. I see your eyes

lifting their tents. They are blue stones, they begin
to outgrow their moss. You blink in surprise
and I wonder what you can see, my funny kin,
as you trouble my silence. I am a shelter of lies.
Should I learn to speak again, or hopeless in
such sanity will I touch some face I recognize?

Down the hall the baskets start back. My arms
fit you like a sleeve, they hold
catkins of your willows, the wild bee farms
of your nerves, each muscle and fold
of your first days. Your old man's face disarms
the nurses. But the doctors return to scold
me. I speak. It is you my silence harms.
I should have known; I should have told
them something to write down. My voice alarms
my throat. 'Name of father-none.' I hold
you and name you bastard in my arms.

And now that's that. There is nothing more
that I can say or lose.
Others have traded life before
and could not speak. I tighten to refuse
your owling eyes, my fragile visitor.
I touch your cheeks, like flowers. You bruise
against me. We unlearn. I am a shore
rocking off you. You break from me. I choose
your only way, my small inheritor
and hand you off, trembling the selves we lose.
Go child, who is my sin and nothing more.

Anne Sexton

You Doctor Martin

**You, Doctor Martin walk from breakfast to madness. Late August,
I speed through the antiseptic tunnel
where the moving dead still talk
of pushing their bones against the thrust
of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel
or the laughing bee on a stalk**

**of death. We stand in broken
lines and wait while they unlock
the doors and count us at the frozen gates
of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
and we move to gravy in our smock
of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates
scratch and whine like chalk**

**in school. There are no knives
for cutting your throat. I make
moccasins all morning. At first my hands
kept empty, unraveled for the lives
they used to work. Now I learn to take
them back, each angry finger that demands
I mend what another will break**

**tomorrow. Of course, I love you;
you lean above the plastic sky,
god of our block, prince of all the foxes.
The breaking crowns are new
that Jack wore.**

**Your third eye
moves among us and lights the separate boxes
where we sleep or cry.**

**What large children we are
here. All over I grow most tall
in the best ward. Your business is people,
you call at the madhouse, an oracular
eye in our nest. Out in the hall
the intercom pages you. You twist in the pull
of the foxy children who fall**

**like floods of life in frost.
And we are magic talking to itself,
noisy and alone. I am queen of all my sins
forgotten. Am I still lost?**

**Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
counting this row and that row of moccasins
waiting on the silent shelf.**

Anne Sexton

Sharon Olds

I Go Back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head, I
see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips aglow in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it—she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
strike sparks from them, I say
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

Sharon Olds

Saturn

By Sharon Olds

He lay on the couch night after night,
mouth open, the darkness of the room
filling his mouth, and no one knew
my father was eating his children. He seemed to
rest so quietly, vast body
inert on the sofa, big hand
fallen away from the glass.

What could be more passive than a man
passed out every night – and yet as he lay
on his back, snoring, our lives slowly
disappeared down the hole of his life.

My brother's arm went in up to the shoulder
and he bit it off, and sucked at the wound
as one sucks at the sockets of lobster. He took
my brother's head between his lips
and snapped it like a cherry off the stem. You would have
seen

only a large, handsome man
heavily sleeping, unconscious. And yet
somewhere in his head his soil-colored eyes
were open, the circles of the whites glittering
as he crunched on the torso of his child between his
jaws,
crushed the bones like the soft shells of crabs
and the delicacies of the genitals
rolled back along his tongue. In the nerves of his gums

**and
bowels he knew what he was doing and he could not
stop himself, like orgasm, his
boy's feet crackling like two raw fish
between his teeth. This is what he wanted,
to take that life into his mouth
and show what a man could do – show his son
what a man's life was.**

The Guild

Every night, as my grandfather sat
in the darkened room in front of the fire,
the liquor like fire in his hand, his eye
glittering meaninglessly in the light
from the flames, his glass eye baleful and stony,
a young man sat with him
in silence and darkness, a college boy with
white skin, unlined, a narrow
beautiful face, a broad domed
forehead, and eyes amber as the resin from
trees too young to be cut yet.
This was his son, who sat, an apprentice,
night after night, his glass of coals
next to the old man's glass of coals,
and he drank when the old man drank, and he learned
the craft of oblivion - that young man
not yet cruel, his hair dark as the
soil that feeds the tree's roots,
that son who would come to be in his turn
better at this than the teacher, the apprentice
who would pass his master in cruelty and oblivion,
drinking steadily by the flames in the blackness,
that young man my father.
Sharon Olds

The Victims

When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and took it in silence, all those years and then kicked you out, suddenly, and her kids loved it. Then you were fired, and we grinned inside, the way people grinned when Nixon's helicopter lifted off the South Lawn for the last time. We were tickled to think of your office taken away, your secretaries taken away, your lunches with three double bourbons, your pencils, your reams of paper. Would they take your suits back, too, those dark carcasses hung in your closet, and the black noses of your shoes with their large pores? She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it until we pricked with her for your annihilation, Father. Now I pass the bums in doorways, the white slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their suits of compressed silt, the stained flippers of their hands, the underwater fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and took it from them in silence until they had given it all away and had nothing left but this.

Sharon Olds

The Ferryer

Three years after my father's death
he goes back to work. Unemployed
for twenty-five years, he's very glad
to be taken on again, shows up
on time, tireless worker. He sits
in the prow of the boat, sweet cox, turned
with his back to the carried. He is dead, but able
to kneel upright, facing forward
toward the other shore. Someone has closed
his mouth, so he looks more comfortable, not
thirsty or calling out, and his eyes
are open, there under the iris the black
line that appeared there in death. He is calm,
he is happy to be hired, he's in business again,
his new job is a joke between us and he
loves to have a joke with me, he keeps
a straight face. He waits, naked,
ivory bow figurehead,
ribs, nipples, lips, a gaunt
tall man, and when I bring people
and set them in the boat and push them off
my father poles them across the river
to the far bank. We don't speak,
he knows that this is simply someone
I want to get rid of, who makes me feel
ugly and afraid. I do not say
the way you did. He knows the labor
and loves it. When I dump someone in
he does not look back, he takes them straight
to hell. He wants to work for me
until I die. Then, he knows, I will
come to him, get in his boat
and be taken across, then hold out my broad
hand to his, help him ashore, we will
embrace like two who were never born,
naked, not breathing then up to our chins we will
pull the dark blanket of earth and
rest together at the end of the working day.

Sharon Olds

The Mortal One

Three months after he lies dead, that
long yellow narrow body,
not like Christ but like one of his saints,
the naked ones in the paintings whose bodies are
done in gilt, all knees and raw ribs,
the ones who died of nettles, bile, the
one who died roasted over a slow fire—
three months later I take the pot of
tulip bulbs out of the closet
and set it on the table and take off the foil hood.
The shoots stand up like young green pencils,
and there in the room is the comfortable smell of rot,
the bulb that did not make it, marked with
ridges like an elephant's notched foot,
I walk down the hall as if I were moving through the
long stem of the tulip toward the closed sheath.
In the kitchen I throw a palmful of peppercorns into the
saucepan
as if I would grow a black tree from the soup,
I throw out the rotten chicken part,
glad again that we burned my father
before one single bloom of mold could
grow up
out of him,
maybe it had begun in his bowels but we burned his
bowels
the way you burn the long blue

scarf of the dead, and all their clothing,
cleansing with fire. How fast time goes
now that I'm happy, now that I know how to
think of his dead body every day
without shock, almost without grief,
to take it into each part of the day the
way a loom parts the vertical threads,
half to the left half to the right like the Red Sea and you
throw the shuttle through with the warp-thread
attached to the feet, that small gold figure of my father—
how often I saw him in paintings and did not know him,
the tiny naked dead one in the corner,
the mortal one.

Sharon Olds

JOHN & MARY

Stephen
Dunn

*John & Mary had never met. They were like
two hummingbirds who also had never met.*

— FROM A FRESHMAN'S SHORT STORY

They were like gazelles who occupied different
grassy plains, running in opposite directions
from different lions. They were like postal clerks
in different zip codes, with different vacation time,
their bosses adamant and clock-driven.

How could they get together?

They were like two people who couldn't get together.

John was a Sufi with a love of the dervish,

Mary of course a Christian with a curfew.

They were like two dolphins in the immensity
of the Atlantic, one playful,

the other stuck in a tuna net—

two absolutely different childhoods!

There was simply no hope for them.

They would never speak in person.

When they ran across that windswept field

toward each other, they were like two freight trains,

one having left Seattle at 6:36 P.M.

at an unknown speed, the other delayed
in Topeka for repairs.

The math indicated that they'd embrace
in another world, if at all, like parallel lines.

Or merely appear kindred and close, like stars.

At The Smithville Methodist Church by Stephen Dunn

It was supposed to be Arts & Crafts for a week,
but when she came home
with the "Jesus Saves" button, we knew what art
was up, what ancient craft.

She liked her little friends. She liked the songs
they sang when they weren't
twisting and folding paper into dolls.
What could be so bad?

Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith
in good men was what
we had to do to stay this side of cynicism,
that other sadness.

OK, we said, One week. But when she came home
singing "Jesus loves me,
the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk.
Could we say Jesus

doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible
is a great book certain people use
to make you feel bad? We sent her back
without a word.

It had been so long since we believed, so long
since we needed Jesus
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was
sufficiently dead,

that our children would think of him like Lincoln
or Thomas Jefferson.
Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief
to a child,

only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story
nearly as good.
On parents' night there were the Arts & Crafts

all spread out

like appetizers. Then we took our seats
in the church
and the children sang a song about the Ark,
and Hallelujah

and one in which they had to jump up and down
for Jesus.

I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain
about what's comic, what's serious.

Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.
You can't say to your child
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks
of extinction and nothing

exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have
a wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car
she sang the songs,

occasionally standing up for Jesus.
There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along
in silence.

Stephen Dunn

Stephen Dunn

The Resurrection

In the converted stable where I work,
after the kerosene warmed the room,
one deadened fly rose to life—
a phenonemon that could turn a boy
from street crime to science
or, if less bright, to the church.
Lucky such a boy wasn't present.
I watched that fly push against the window
as if it had just learned something
about the locomotion of its wings
and its little fly heart. Perhaps
it wanted to foul whatever it could reach,
an act, no doubt, of temperament and taste.
I was beginning, no, deciding,
to be the poet of this fly, didn't every thing
in the world need its poet?
and I would tell of its resurrection
in a deceptive room with temporary heat
and illusory glass. To be a fly
was to fly in the face
of all that could defeat it,
and there was the pleasure of shit
to look forward to, the pleasure of bothering
cows and people, the pleasure of pure speed.
Another fly rose and pushed
against the window, two flies now,
and suddenly I was poet of flies in winter
as they sought the other side
of the glass, which was death,
victims of having once risen, ignorant
buggers, happy on bad evidence, warm, abuzz.

The Guardian Angel

Afloat between lives and stale truths,
he realizes
he's never truly protected one soul,
they all die anyway, and what good
is solace,
solace is cheap. The signs are clear:
the drooping wings, the shameless thinking
about utility
and self. It's time to stop.

The guardian angel lives for a month
with other angels,
sings the angelic songs, is reminded
that he doesn't have a human choice.
The angel of love
lies down with him, and loving
restores to him his pure heart.
Yet how hard it is
to descend into sadness once more.

When the poor are evicted, he stands
between them
and the bank, but the bank sees nothing
in its way. When the meek are overpowered
he's there, the thin air
through which they fall. Without effect
he keeps getting in the way of meek.
He keeps wrapping
his wings around those in the cock,

Even his lamentations are unheard,
though now,
in for the long haul, trying to live
beyond despair, he believes, he needs
to believe
everything he does takes root, hums
beneath the surfaces of the world.

Stephen Dunn

A POSTMORTEM GUIDE

For my eulogist, in advance

Do not praise me for my exceptional serenity.
Can't you see I've turned away
from the large excitements,
and have accepted all the troubles?

Go down to the old cemetery; you'll see
there's nothing definitive to be said.
The dead once were all kinds—
boundary breakers and scalawags,
martyrs of the flesh, and so many
dumb bunnies of duty, unbearably nice.

I've been a little of each.

And, please, resist the temptation
of speaking about virtue.
The seldom-tempted are too fond
of that word, the small-
spirited, the unburdened.
Know that I've admired in others
only the fraught straining
to be good.

Adam's my man and Eve's not to blame.
He bit in; it made no sense to stop.

Still, for accuracy's sake you might say
I often stopped,
that I rarely went as far as I dreamed.

And since you know my hardships,
understand they're mere bump and setback
against history's horror.
Remind those seated, perhaps weeping,
how obscene it is
for some of us to complain.

Tell them I had second chances.
I knew joy.
I was burned by books early
and kept sidling up to the flame.

Tell them that at the end I had no need
for God, who'd become just a story
I once loved, one of many
with concealments and late-night rescues,
high sentence and pomp. The truth is

I learned to live without hope
as well as I could, almost happily,
in the despoiled and radiant now.

You who are one of them, say that I loved
my companions most of all.
In all sincerity, say that they provided
a better way to be alone.

Stephen. Du ~~is~~ n

HERE AND NOW

for Barbara

There are words
I've had to save myself from,
like My Lord and Blessed Mother,
words I said and never meant,
though I admit a part of me misses
the ornamental stateliness
of High Mass, that smell

of incense. Heaven did exist,
I discovered, but was reciprocal
and momentary, like lust
felt at exactly the same time---
two mortals, say, on a resilient bed,
making a small case for themselves.

You and I became the words
I'd say before I'd lay me down to sleep,
and again when I'd wake---wishful
words, no belief in them yet.
It seemed you'd been put on earth

to distract me
from what was doctrinal and dry.
Electricity may start things,
but if they're to last
I've come to understand
a steady, low-voltage hum

of affection

must be arrived at. How else to offset
the occasional slide
into neglect and ill temper?
I learned, in time, to let heaven
go its mythy way, to never again

be a supplicant
of any single idea. For you and me
it's *here and now* from here on in.
Nothing can save us, nor do we wish
to be saved.

Let night come
with its austere grandeur,
ancient superstitions and fears.
It can do us no harm.
We'll put some music on,
open the curtains, let things darken
as they will.

Stephen Dunn