

# Finding the Sacred through Poetry

A weekend of reflection on Spirituality  
with great poets as our guides



(Image: Brocken Inaglory via Wikimedia Commons)

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## Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water-ski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

By Billy Collins, from *Sailing Alone Around the Room*. © Random House, 2001.

## Having Come This Far

I've been through what my through was to be  
I did what I could and couldn't  
I was never sure how I would get there

I nourished an ardor for thresholds  
for stepping stones and for ladders  
I discovered detour and ditch

I swam in the high tides of greed  
I built sandcastles to house my dreams  
I survived the sunburns of love

No longer do I hunt for targets  
I've climbed all the summits I need to  
and I've eaten my share of lotus

Now I give praise and thanks  
for what could not be avoided  
and for every foolhardy choice



(Image: Anna16 via Wikimedia Commons)

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I cherish my wounds and their cures  
and the sweet enervations of bliss  
My book is an open life

I wave goodbye to the absolutes  
and send my regards to infinity  
I'd rather be blithe than correct

Until something transcendent turns up  
I splash in my poetry puddle  
and try to keep God amused

By James Broughton, from *Packing up for Paradise*. © Black Sparrow Press, 1997.

### **An Afternoon In The Stacks**

Closing the book, I find I have left my head  
inside. It is dark in here, but the chapters open  
their beautiful spaces and give a rustling sound,  
words adjusting themselves to their meaning.  
Long passages open at successive pages. An echo,  
continuous from the title onward, hums  
behind me. From in here, the world looms,  
a jungle redeemed by these linked sentences  
carved out when an author traveled and a reader  
kept the way open. When this book ends  
I will pull it inside-out like a sock  
and throw it back in the library. But the rumor  
of it will haunt all that follows in my life.  
A candleflame in Tibet leans when I move.

By William Stafford, from *The Way It Is*. © Graywolf Press, 1998.

### **Love (III)**

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lack'd anything.

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here";  
Love said, "You shall be he."  
"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
I cannot look on thee."  
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,

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"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marr'd them; let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"

"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."

So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert, from *The Temple, Sacred Poems and Private Ejaculations*, edited by N. Ferrar. (Cambridge: T. Buck and R. Daniel, 1633).

## Diner

The time has come to say goodbye, our plates empty except  
for our greasy napkins. Comrades, you on my left, balding,  
middle-aged guy with a ponytail, and you, Lefty, there on my  
right, though we barely spoke I feel our kinship. You were  
steadfast in passing the ketchup, the salt and pepper, no man  
could ask for better companions. Lunch is over, the cheese-  
burger and fries, the Denver sandwich, the counter nearly  
empty. Now we must go our separate ways. Not a fond embrace,  
but perhaps a hearty handshake. No? Well then, farewell. It is  
unlikely I'll pass this way again. Unlikely we will all meet again  
on this earth, to sit together beneath the neon and fluorescent  
calmly sipping our coffee, like the sages sipping their tea  
underneath the willow, sitting quietly, saying nothing.

By Louis Jenkins, from *Sea Smoke*. © Holy Cow! Press, 2004.

BATTER my heart, three person'd God; for, you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend,  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new  
I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,  
Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.  
Yet dearely'I love you,'and would be loved faine,  
But am bethroth'd unto your enemye:  
Divorce mee,'untie or breake that knot againe,  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

By John Donne, from *The Holy Sonnets*, number XIV

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## Faith

I want to write about faith.  
About the way the moon rises over cold snow  
Night after night.  
Faithful even in its fading from fullness  
slowly becoming that last curving and impossible  
sliver of light  
Before the final darkness.

But I have no faith myself.  
I do not give it the smallest entry.  
Let this then, my small poem  
Like a new moon, slender and barely open  
Be the first prayer that opens me to faith.

By David Whyte, from *Where Many Rivers Meet*. © Many Rivers Press, 1990.



(Image:Pixabay)

## Those Winter Sundays

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.

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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?

By Robert Hayden, from *Angle of Ascent*. © Liveright, 1975.

### **A Visitor**

My father, for example,  
who was young once  
and blue-eyed,  
returns  
on the darkest of nights  
to the porch and knocks  
wildly at the door,  
and if I answer  
I must be prepared  
for his waxy face,  
for his lower lip  
swollen with bitterness.  
And so, for a long time,  
I did not answer,  
but slept fitfully  
between his hours of rapping.  
But finally there came the night  
when I rose out of my sheets  
and stumbled down the hall.  
The door fell open

and I knew I was saved  
and could bear him,  
pathetic and hollow,  
with even the least of his dreams  
frozen inside him,  
and the meanness gone.  
And I greeted him and asked him  
into the house,  
and lit the lamp,  
and looked into his blank eyes

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in which at last  
I saw what a child must love,  
I saw what love might have done  
had we loved in time.

By Mary Oliver, from *Dream Work*. © Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.



(Image:Pixabay)

**“Hope” is the thing with feathers – (314)**

"Hope" is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –  
And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard –  
And sore must be the storm –  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm –  
I've heard it in the chillest land –  
And on the strangest Sea –  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb – of Me.

By Emily Dickinson, from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. © Harvard University, 1999.

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## Root Cellar

Nothing would sleep in that cellar, dank as a ditch,  
Bulbs broke out of boxes hunting for chinks in the dark,  
Shoots dangled and drooped,  
Lolling obscenely from mildewed crates,  
Hung down long yellow evil necks, like tropical snakes.  
And what a congress of stinks!  
Roots ripe as old bait,  
Pulpy stems, rank, silo-rich,  
Leaf-mold, manure, lime, piled against slippery planks.  
Nothing would give up life:  
Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath.

By Theodore Roethke, from *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*.  
© Knopf Doubleday, 2011.

## The Journey

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice—  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations,  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company

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as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

By Mary Oliver, from *Dream Work*. © Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

### Summons

Keep me from going to sleep too soon  
Or if I go to sleep too soon  
Come wake me up. Come any hour  
of the night. Come whistling up the road.  
Stomp on the porch. Bang on the door.  
Make me get out of bed and come  
and let you in and light the light.  
Tell me the northern lights are on  
And make me look. Or tell me clouds  
Are doing something to the moon  
They never did before, and show me.  
See that I see. Talk to me till  
I'm half as wide awake as you --  
And start to dress wondering why  
I ever went to bed at all.  
Tell me the walking is superb.  
Not only tell me but persuade me.  
You know I'm not too hard persuaded.

By Robert Francis, from *Come Out Into the Sun*. © Univ. of Massachusetts, 1965.

### Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things --  
For skies of couple-color as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim.  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced -- fold, fallow and plow  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange:  
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how).  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change.  
Praise him.

By Gerard Manley Hopkins. Public domain, 1918.



(Image: John Holliger)

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Just as the watchman in the wine fields  
has a shed for himself and keeps awake,  
I am the shed in your arms, Lord,  
my night is drawn from your night.

Vineyard, meadow, weathered apple orchard,  
field that never lets a spring go by,  
fig tree rooted in ground hard  
as marble, yet carrying a hundred figs:

odor pours out from your heavy boughs,  
and you never ask if I am keeping watch or not;  
confident, dissolved by the juices, your depths  
keep climbing past me silently.

By Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Robert Bly. © Harper, 1981.

### **The Lake Isle of Innisfree**

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:

Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evenings full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

By William Butler Yeats. Public domain, 1890.

### **Heaven-Haven**

I have desired to go  
Where springs not fail,  
To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail  
And a few lilies blow.

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And I have asked to be  
Where no storms come,  
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,  
And out of the swing of the sea.

By Gerard Manley Hopkins. Public domain, 1918.

I live my life in growing orbits  
which move out over the things of the world.  
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,  
but that will be my attempt.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,  
and I have been circling for a thousand years,  
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,  
or a great song.

By Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Robert Bly. © Harper, 1981.

### **Arbor**

As a child she planted  
these roses, these vines  
heavy with trumpets and honey.

Now at the end of her life  
she asks for an arbor. At night  
she sees roses rooted in heaven,

wisteria hanging its vineyards  
over her head, all green things  
climbing, climbing.

She wants to walk through this door,  
not as she walks to the next  
room but to another place

altogether. She will leave her cane  
at the door but the door is  
necessary. She knows how the raw  
space in a wall nearly burned or  
newly born makes children pause  
or step in. It leads somewhere.

They look out on another country.

By Nancy Willard, from *Swimming Lessons*. © Brighton, 2001.



(Image: Georges Seguin via Wikimedia Commons)

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It's possible I am pushing through solid rock  
in flintlike layers, as ore lies, alone;  
I am such a long way in I see no way through,  
and no space: everything is close to my face,  
and everything close to my face is stone.

I don't have much knowledge yet in grief --  
so this massive darkness makes me small.  
You be the master: make yourself fierce, break in:  
then your great transforming will happen to me,  
and my great grief cry will happen to you.

By Rainer Maria Rilke, from *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Robert Bly. © Harper, 1981.

### **Prayer at Genesareth - Mark 5: 1-20**

Holed up within me,  
his eyes bleeding  
in the crouched darkness,  
is a frightened, cellular creature,  
the stunted, primordial me.

He lurks in guarded depths.  
My fear is vigilant.  
By day  
I overtalk his cries  
and if at night he howls  
I shut my soul  
and play at sleep.

Then Jesus  
pushed off course  
by some meddlesome squall  
crashed my shore.  
With the first syllable  
of his unwanted words  
like a sudden pregnancy

he stirs.  
Even prayer and fasting  
are now helpless against  
the force of his  
delivery.

He rips.  
Bolts.  
Out the mouth of my screams  
down the cheeks of my tears.

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In the nakedness of his exorcism  
his deranged features betray  
the practiced sanity of his keeper.

There is no hospitable pig  
for easy habitation  
or death-dealing cliff  
to bring him rest.  
The poor bastard is loose  
and he is mine.

I will search him out  
among the pliable words of pity  
and the delighted face of shock.  
I will fall on him with kisses,  
swallow him down,  
and await our redemption.

By John Shea, slightly adapted from *Hour of the Unexpected*. © Tabor Publishing, 1977.

Last night I dreamed -- blessed illusion --  
That I had a beehive here in my heart  
And that the Golden bees were making  
White combs and sweet honey  
From my old failures.

Excerpt from "Last Night," by Antonio Machado. Slightly adapted from a translation by Robert Bly.

### **God's Grandeur**

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
    It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
    It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
    And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
    And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And, for all this, nature is never spent;  
    There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
    Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs --  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
    World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

By Gerard Manley Hopkins. Public domain, 1918.

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