

Poems in The Angle of Repose



The maximum angle to the horizontal at which rocks, soil, etc.,
will remain without sliding

www.WordSPA.net

AskKimLangley@gmail.com

216.226.3351

Materials developed by Kim Langley, M.Ed. for WordSPA ministry

"What really interests me," he says, "is how two such unlike particles cling together, and under what strains, rolling downhill into their future until they reached the Angle of Repose where I knew them." When a rock rolls downhill, it eventually stops. Whatever the angle of the hill is where the rock has stopped is the "Angle of Repose."

Character Lyman Ward in the Pulitzer prize winning novel, The Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner

Lifer

McNeil Island Correctional Center, I:86

Hunched over hard white bread
and plastic soup bowl filled with gruel,
he looked like a stork, a silly angel,
all neck and bony shoulder-wings
and awkward beak.

His head lifted, then fell
in a slow deliberate dance,
three, four times, doughy-skinned
in a gray room sickened by yellow light.
He kept his eyes shut tight.

Outside the prison dining hall,
a turnkey slammed and locked
the heavy iron gate. The old man placed
his palms together softly, raised
them to his stubbled chin

crossed himself, and ate.

By Sam Hamill, from *Almost Paradise*. © Shambhala Publications, 2005.

The Buddha's Last Instruction

"Make of yourself a light"
said the Buddha,
before he died.

I think of this every morning
as the east begins
to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first
signal—a white fan
streaked with pink and violet,
even green.

An old man, he lay down
between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything,
knowing it was his final hour.
The light burns upward,
it thickens and settles over the fields.
Around him, the villagers gathered
and stretched forward to listen.
Even before the sun itself
hangs, disattached, in the blue air,
I am touched everywhere
by its ocean of yellow waves.
No doubt he thought of everything
that had happened in his difficult life.
And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazes over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire—
clearly I'm not needed,
yet I feel myself turning
into something of inexplicable value.
Slowly, beneath the branches,
he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.



By Mary Oliver

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
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

In the Basement of the Goodwill Store

In the musty light, in the thin brown air
of damp carpet, doll heads and rust,
beneath long rows of sharp footfalls
like nails in a lid, an old man stands
trying on glasses, lifting each pair
from the box like a glittering fish
and holding it up to the light
of a dirty bulb. Near him, a heap
of enameled pans as white as skulls
looms in the catacomb shadows,
and old toilets with dry red throats
cough up bouquets of curtain rods.

You've seen him somewhere before.
He's wearing the green leisure suit
you threw out with the garbage,
and the Christmas tie you hated,
and the ventilated wingtip shoes
you found in your father's closet
and wore as a joke. And the glasses
which finally fit him, through which
he looks to see you looking back—
two mirrors which flash and glance—
are those through which one day
you too will look down over the years,
when you have grown old and thin
and no longer particular,
and the things you once thought
you were rid of forever
have taken you back in their arms.



By Ted Kooser, from *One World at a Time*. © The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985.

Sometimes We Don't Talk Much, Debbie And I

so today we take an afternoon drive to an orchard
buy two jars of dark honey, an acorn squash,
three cucumbers, six ears of corn, a gigantic muskmelon,
a sack of hot peppers for seventy-five cents, a half-dozen tomatoes,
a small basket each of Jonathans, McJonathans and Akanes,
talk all the way there
through the corn-green countryside,
drive around
through small towns clustered
north of Omaha
like beautiful mushroom rings around an old stump,

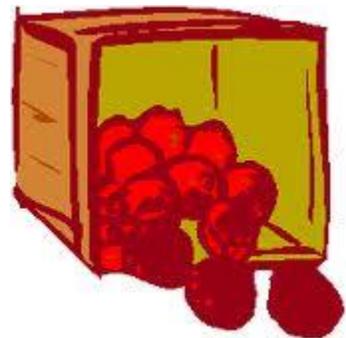
and we talk about the living it takes

talk until
years fall down like rain,

and we drive our red car
through the green hills back to Omaha
where our children
nestle like mice

in an old grain bin,
and we bring back our box
filled with fresh fruits and vegetables
and we bring back ourselves,
filled with our lives.

By Greg Kosmicki, from *Some Hero of the Past*. © Word Press.



Earl

In Sitka, because they are fond of them,
People have named the seals. Every seal
is named Earl because they are killed one
after another by the orca, the killer
whale; seal bodies tossed left and right
into the air. "At least he didn't get
Earl," someone says. And sure enough,
after a time, that same friendly,
bewhiskered face bobs to the surface.
It's Earl again. Well, how else are you
to live except by denial, by some
palatable fiction, some little song to
sing while the inevitable, the black and
white blindsiding fact, comes hurtling
toward you out of the deep?

By Louis Jenkins, from *North of the Cities*. Will o' the Wisp Books,
2007.

The Meaning of Life

There is a moment just before
a dog vomits when its stomach
heaves dry, pumping what's deep
inside the belly to the mouth.
If you are fast you can grab
her by the collar and shove her
out the door, avoid the slimy bile,
hunks of half chewed food
from landing on the floor.
You must be quick, decisive,
controlled, and if you miss
the cue and the dog erupts
en route, you must forgive
her quickly and give yourself

to scrubbing up the mess.

Most of what I have learned
in life leads back to this.

By Nancy Fitzgerald from *Poems I Never Wrote*. Poetry Harbor,
2001.

Advice to Myself

Leave the dishes.
Let the celery rot in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator
and an earthen scum harden on the kitchen floor.
Leave the black crumbs in the bottom of the toaster.
Throw the cracked bowl out and don't patch the cup.
Don't patch anything. Don't mend. Buy safety pins.
Don't even sew on a button.
Let the wind have its way, then the earth
that invades as dust and then the dead
foaming up in gray rolls underneath the couch.
Talk to them. Tell them they are welcome.
Don't keep all the pieces of the puzzles
or the doll's tiny shoes in pairs, don't worry
who uses whose toothbrush or if anything
matches, at all.
Except one word to another. Or a thought.
Pursue the authentic-decide first
what is authentic,
then go after it with all your heart.
Your heart, that place
you don't even think of cleaning out.
That closet stuffed with savage mementos.
Don't sort the paper clips from screws from saved baby teeth
or worry if we're all eating cereal for dinner
again. Don't answer the telephone, ever,

or weep over anything at all that breaks.
Pink molds will grow within those sealed cartons
in the refrigerator. Accept new forms of life
and talk to the dead
who drift in though the screened windows, who collect
patiently on the tops of food jars and books.
Recycle the mail, don't read it, don't read anything
except what destroys
the insulation between yourself and your experience
or what pulls down or what strikes at or what shatters
this ruse you call necessity.

By Louise Erdrich, from *Original Fire: Selected and New Poems*.

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

"How to be a Poet" by Wendell Berry from *Given*.
© Shoemaker Hoard, 2005.

Job

(Job 28:28)

Yes: wisdom begins with fear of the Lord,
which comprehends the power that made the seas,
the earth, the shimmering dawn, the unexplored
unfathomed skies, the moon, and the Pleiades.
Which also know Who comes to judge our shoddy
little failing lives, knowing full well,
we need not fear the one who kills the body,
but only He who condemns the soul to hell.
Which also knows it magnifies the Lord,
defying the demon, being the only release,
oddly enough, from fear, being its own reward,
which is also wise, is faith, is hope, is peace,
is tender mercy, over and over again,
until, at last, is love, is love. Amen.

By William Baer, from *Borges and Other Sonnets*. Truman State University Press.

Notes from the Other Side

I divested myself of despair
and fear when I came here.

Now there is no more catching
one's own eye in the mirror,

there are no bad books, no plastic,
no insurance premiums, and of course
no illness. Contrition
does not exist, nor gnashing

of teeth. No one howls as the first
clod of earth hits the casket.

The poor we no longer have with us.
Our calm hearts strike only the hour,

and God, as promised, proves
to be mercy clothed in light.

By Jane Kenyon, from *Constance*. Graywolf Press.

Acceptance

When the spent sun throws up its rays on cloud
And goes down burning into the gulf below,
No voice in nature is heard to cry aloud
At what has happened. Birds, at least must know
It is the change to darkness in the sky.
Murmuring something quiet in her breast,
One bird begins to close a faded eye;
Or overtaken too far from his nest,
Hurrying low above the grove, some waif
Swoops just in time to his remembered tree.
At most he thinks or twitters softly, 'Safe!
Now let the night be dark for all of me.
Let the night be too dark for me to see
Into the future. Let what will be, be.'

By Robert Lee Frost

Educational Purposes Only. Not for Reproduction. Every effort has been made to use only copyright free photographs and illustrations. Free use granted for educational facilitators by Kim Langley, M.Ed., founder of WordSPA. Contact us at www.WordSPA.net and let us know how you are using the materials, contribute a favorite poem or share your experience. To bring a WordSPA retreat or workshop to your organization, call 216.226.3351 or email AskKimLangley@gmail.com.