

A Personal Memory Poem Sampler

Read all pieces marked by a green arrow.

Below are poems about the authors' memories of specific events, things, and persons in their own lives. All are sophisticated examples of poems that might come out of Poetry Project #1.

The aim of this project—besides having a blast with words!—is to practice using really, really *specific*, gritty, sensory, concrete details. I want you to simply describe an event and/or a thing very closely and concretely, without generalizing, without explaining anything, and with as few abstractions as possible. Just be REAL.

For some tips and ideas, scroll to the last page of this document.



Theodore Roethke

My Papa's Waltz

The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy;
But I hung on like death:
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist
Was battered on one knuckle;
At every step you missed
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head
With a palm caked hard by dirt,
Then waltzed me off to bed
Still clinging to your shirt.

Lisa Lewis

Lisa Lewis does use a lot of abstract reflection in the poem below, but she mostly asks questions and actively thinks about her subject rather than *explaining things away*. And she always describes events in very specific terms, exactly as she remembers them.



The Accident

I had no business there in the first place—
I'm putting on weight—but the counter help was all smiles,
Having survived the lunch hour crunch. My husband and I
Ordered burgers and fries; I was in front, so I chose
A seat on the far side, back to the window.
I picked off two thin rings of onion; the fries were limp.
Something about the car, maybe, both of us
Interested, me a little bitchy, so it was almost the way you turn
Instinctively, say from a spider web in a darkened hall,
How I looked across the restaurant and found her face,
Left cheekbone swollen to a baseball, the same eye blackened,
Heavy make-up, front tooth out in a jack-o-lantern grin
As she tried to look friendly to the young waitress
Her husband motioned over. He rested one hand
On his wife's shoulder, solicitous, the other waving
A lit cigarette, a small man, dark-haired, now laughing aloud,
Glancing at the uncombed head of his beaten wife again
Turning her back to the room, though not crowded,
All suddenly staring, reading the last few hours
Of those lives in a horror of recognition.
She cupped her hand shading the side of her face,
You could see lumps of vertebrae through her t-shirt,
And he kept on talking, smiling at her, with a slight tilt
Of his head, as if saying *poor baby, something happened to her,*
Good thing I'm here to take care of her, a car wreck,
A bad one, a smash-up, and all of us looked
And knew better. At the table with them was a little girl.
The man, the woman, the five-year-old daughter—
Even the man and the beaten woman had the same features,
As people do who have lived together for years. I couldn't see
The child's face. She was jotting a note on a small pad,
The waitress's name, as if to write a letter praising
Her fine service, and she smiled through her horror, she
Hardly more than sixteen, with clear pale skin. Next to us
A woman in permed hair and suit rose to leave, lunch untouched,
With her daughter. She carried a leather legal-sized folder.
We left soon after, heads turned, not looking,
Because sometime the man and woman would go
Home to the privacy of a city apartment, no neighbors
Home all day to hear, but first I said, in the restaurant,
Across the room where he couldn't hear, *If I had a gun*
I'd blow his brains out, and I thought of that moment

Familiar from movies, the round black hole in the forehead
Opening, the back of the skull blowing out frame by frame
Like a baseball smashing a window, but no one near
Would've even been bloodied because no one was standing anywhere
Near him, his hand on the beaten woman's shoulder
Might as well've been yards from his body.

I was taught not to write about this. But my teacher,
A man with a reputation who hoped I would make
Good, never knew that I, too, have been hit in the face by a man.
He knew only my clumsy efforts to cast what happened
Into "characters," and he loved the beauty in poetry.
Maybe what I had written was awkward. Maybe my teacher
Guessed what happened and forbade me writing it
For some good reason, he cared for me, or he feared
He too might've slapped my face, because I, like the character
In that first effort, was bitching to the heavens and a redneck
Boyfriend, and we argued outdoors, near a stack of light wood
Used to kindle the stove like everyone has
In the foothills of North Carolina. That day I railed
Like a caricature of a bitching redneck woman,
Hands on hips, sometimes a clenched fist, I was
Bitching, I think, as he planned some stupid thing
I hated, like fishing, pitching horseshoes, driving
To visit his mother on Sundays, her tiny house
Tangled in dirt roads, where she sat in the kitchen dipping snuff.
Whatever he wanted to do was harmless,
But so was my shrieking, my furious pleading, an endless loop
Inside my head rolling *I want to be rid of him*, and he slapped me
Across my open mouth. I felt myself shut up and staggered,
Because he was a large man, and I was a large woman,
He had to make sure he hit me pretty hard,
Both of us strong and mad as hell, early
One Saturday morning, when he wanted to do what he wanted to do
And I wanted to keep him from it. He slapped me
Twice, open-handed, knocking me, open-handed, to my knees,
In kindling, so my knees were scraped bloody and my hand
Closed on a foot and a half of inch-thick pine, and I stumbled up,
Swinging, my eyes popping wide, till I brought it down
Hard across his shoulder. I saw how the rage on his face
Flashed to fear, just that quick, a second, or less,
And he turned to run but he made the wrong choice,
If he'd gone to the road I wouldn't have followed, but he ran
Inside my "duplex" apartment, an old country house
Cut in two. So I cornered him upstairs and knocked him out.
It was simple. He fell so hard, I thought *I've killed him*;
I was throwing my clothes in a paper bag when I heard him
Sobbing. In the bathroom mirror I found the black eye and lop-sided lip,
And it seemed as if I might still take it back, the last ten minutes,
The chase, the beating, the high-pitched screaming,
The stubborn need to go fishing. But the make-up I disdained
In those years—I had just turned twenty—didn't do much
To cover the bruises. His face was clear. The knot on his head

Stopped swelling under ice. It was easy to tell him
To get the hell out and only regret it every other minute
Since there were no children, no marriage, even,
And I was young and believed I had proven
I was strong. I had beaten a man to his knees.
Months later I would go to college and stay safely there for years,
Not letting on to anyone the terrible things I'd done, until I wrote
That clumsy poem with the unbelievable characters, and now I've tried
To do it again, this time with different characters, I've defied
My teacher, who meant for me to learn to write well,
Who meant for the world to think well of me,
And I am not sorry. If he asked why I would say
I had to do it, and that lie would be like the lie of living
Without telling, till one day seeing the beaten face,
What scared me most, the missing tooth, the tangled hair, the vertebrae,
The daughter. There is no use thinking what it means
About me to say this: I am not sorry. I might have killed
That man. I might have blown his brains out.

Tony Hoagland

Hoagland's poem is about an issue somewhat similar to Lewis's above. It's not super full of descriptive detail, but it pairs in an interesting way with Lewis's poems. Both are pieces about physical assault and gender.

Adam and Eve

I wanted to punch her right in the mouth and that's the truth.
After all, we had gotten from the station of the flickering glances
to the station of the hungry mouths,
from the shoreline of skirts and faded jeans
to the ocean of unencumbered skin,
from the perilous mountaintop of the apartment steps
to the sanctified valley of the bed—

the candle fluttering upon the dresser top, its little yellow blade
sending up its whiff of waxy smoke,
and I could smell her readiness
like a dank cloud above a field,

when at the crucial moment, the all-important moment,
the moment standing at attention,

she held her milk white hand agitatedly
over the entrance to her body and said No,

and my brain burst into flame.

If I couldn't sink myself in her like a dark spur
or dissolve into her like a clod thrown in a river,

can I go all the way in the saying, and say
I wanted to punch her right in the face?
Am I allowed to say that,
that I wanted to punch her right in her soft face?

Or is the saying just another instance of rapaciousness,
just another way of doing what I wanted then,
by saying it?

Is a man just an animal, and is a woman not an animal?
Is the name of the animal power?
Is it true that the man wishes to see the woman
hurt with her own pleasure

and the woman wishes to see the expression on the man's face
of someone falling from great height,
that the woman thrills with the power of her weakness
and the man is astonished by the weakness of his power?

Is the sexual chase a hunt where the animal inside
drags the human down
into a jungle made of vowels,
hormonal undergrowth of sweat and hair,

or is this an obsolete idea
lodged like a fossil
in the brain of the ape
who lives inside the man?

Can the fossil be surgically removed
or dissolved, or redesigned
so the man can be a human being, like a woman?

Does the woman see the man as a house
where she might live in safety,
and does the man see the woman as a door
through which he might escape
the hated prison of himself,

and when the door is locked,
does he hate the door instead?
Does he learn to hate all doors?

I've seen rain turn into snow then back to rain,
and I've seen making love turn into fucking
then back to making love,
and no one covered up their faces out of shame,
no one rose and walked into the lonely maw of night.

But where was there, in fact, to go?
Are some things better left unsaid?
Shall I tell you her name?

Can I say it again,
that I wanted to punch her right in the face?

Until we say the truth, there can be no tenderness.
As long as there is desire, we will not be safe.

Greg Orr

For much of his early career, Orr wrote about only one thing: the death of his brother when they were kids. Orr accidentally shot him while hunting.

If you are interested, you can read more about his experience in an essay called “On Living After Accidentally Killing Someone.” Go to Class Library/Poetry/Greg Orr: On Killing Brother.



Litany

I remember him falling beside me,
the dark stain already seeping across his parka hood.
I remember screaming and running the half mile to our house.
I remember hiding in my room.
I remember that it was hard to breathe
and that I kept the door shut in terror that someone would enter.
I remember pressing my knuckles into my eyes.
I remember looking out the window once
at where an ambulance had backed up
over the lawn to the front door.
I remember someone hung from a tree near the barn
the deer we'd killed just before I shot my brother.
I remember toward evening someone came with soup.
I slurped it down, unable to look up.
In the bowl, among the vegetable chunks,
pale shapes of the alphabet bobbed at random
or lay in the shallow spoon.

Notice that Orr in the poem above simply makes a list of specific, concrete details he recalls from the horrific day when he accidentally shot and killed his brother. Except in one instance, he never explains how he feels or editorializes about the experience. All he does is describe it as concretely as honestly as he can. The details in his memory ultimately tell us more about how he felt than any explanation or essay could!

In this next poem below, he uses a different strategy.

Gathering the Bones Together

for Peter Orr

*When all the rooms of the house
fill with smoke, it's not enough
to say an angel is sleeping on the chimney.*

1. A NIGHT IN THE BARN

The deer carcass hangs from a rafter.
Wrapped in blankets, a boy keeps watch
from a pile of loose hay. Then he sleeps

and dreams about a death that is coming:
Inside him, there are small bones
scattered in a field among burdocks and dead grass.
He will spend his life walking there,
gathering the bones together.

Pigeons rustle in the eaves.
At his feet, the German shepherd
snaps its jaws in its sleep.

2.

A father and his four sons
run down a slope toward
a deer they just killed.
The father and two sons carry
rifles. They laugh, jostle,
and chatter together.
A gun goes off
and the youngest brother
falls to the ground.
A boy with a rifle
stands beside him,
screaming.

3.

I crouch in the corner of my room,
staring into the glass well
of my hands; far down
I see him drowning in air.

Outside, leaves shaped like mouths
make a black pool
under a tree. Snails glide
there, little death-swans.

4. SMOKE

Something has covered the chimney
and the whole house fills with smoke.
I go outside and look up at the roof,
but I can't see anything.
I go back inside. Everyone weeps,
walking from room to room.
Their eyes ache. This smoke
turns people into shadows.
Even after it is gone
and the tears are gone,
we will smell it in pillows
when we lie down to sleep.

5.

He lives in a house of black glass.
Sometimes I visit him, and we talk.
My father says he is dead,
but what does that mean?
Last night I found a child
sleeping on a nest of bones.
He had a red, leaf-shaped
scar on his cheek.
I lifted him up
and carried him with me,
though I didn't know where I was going.

6. THE JOURNEY

Each night, I knelt on a marble slab
and scrubbed at the blood.
I scrubbed for years and still it was there.
But tonight the bones in my feet
begin to burn. I stand up
and start walking, and the slab
appears under my feet with each step,
a white road only as long as your body.

7. THE DISTANCE

The winter I was eight, a horse
slipped on the ice, breaking its leg.
Father took a rifle, a can of gasoline.
I stood by the road at dusk and watched
the carcass burning in the far pasture.

I was twelve when I killed him;
I felt my own bones wrench from my body.
Now I am twenty-seven and walk
beside this river, looking for them.
They have become a bridge
that arches toward the other shore.

Elizabeth Bishop

Just a brief story about catching a fish, with almost nothing but TONS of ULTRA specific, vivid, close detail. She notices every miniscule thing about this fish, even the LICE on the fish, fer gawd's sake!



The Fish

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes

which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.



In the Waiting Room

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.
It was winter. It got dark
early. The waiting room

was full of grown-up people,
arctics and overcoats,
lamps and magazines.
My aunt was inside
what seemed like a long time
and while I waited I read
the *National Geographic*
(I could read) and carefully
studied the photographs:
the inside of a volcano,
black, and full of ashes;
then it was spilling over
in rivulets of fire.
Osa and Martin Johnson
dressed in riding breeches,
laced boots, and pith helmets.
A dead man slung on a pole
--"Long Pig," the caption said.
Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
I read it right straight through.
I was too shy to stop.
And then I looked at the cover:
the yellow margins, the date.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--
not very loud or long.
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.

But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How--I didn't know any
word for it--how "unlikely". . .
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another.

Then I was back in it.
The War was on. Outside,
in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
of February, 1918.

First Death in Nova Scotia

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:
Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.

Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur's father.

Since Uncle Arthur fired
a bullet into him,
he hadn't said a word.
He kept his own counsel
on his white, frozen lake,
the marble-topped table.
His breast was deep and white,
cold and caressable;
his eyes were red glass,
much to be desired.

"Come," said my mother,
"Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur."
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur's hand.
Arthur's coffin was
a little frosted cake,
and the red-eyed loon eyed it
from his white, frozen lake.

Arthur was very small.
He was all white, like a doll
that hadn't been painted yet.
Jack Frost had started to paint him
the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).
He had just begun on his hair,
a few red strokes, and then
Jack Frost had dropped the brush
and left him white, forever.

The gracious royal couples
were warm in red and ermine;
their feet were well wrapped up
in the ladies' ermine trains.
They invited Arthur to be
the smallest page at court.
But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?



Sharon Olds

The Race

When I got to the airport I rushed up to the desk,
bought a ticket, ten minutes later
they told me the flight was cancelled, the doctors
had said my father would not live through the night
and the flight was cancelled. A young man
with a dark brown moustache told me
another airline had a nonstop
leaving in seven minutes. See that
elevator over there, well go
down to the first floor, make a right, you'll
see a yellow bus, get off at the
second Pan Am terminal, I
ran, I who have no sense of direction
raced exactly where he'd told me, a fish
slipping upstream deftly against
the flow of the river. I jumped off that bus with those
bags I had thrown everything into
in five minutes, and ran, the bags
wagged me from side to side as if
to prove I was under the claims of the material,
I ran up to a man with a flower on his breast,
I who always go to the end of the line, I said
Help me. He looked at my ticket, he said
Make a left and then a right, go up the moving stairs and then
run. I lumbered up the moving stairs,
at the top I saw the corridor,
and then I took a deep breath, I said
goodbye to my body, goodbye to comfort,
I used my legs and heart as if I would
gladly use them up for this,
to touch him again in this life. I ran, and the
bags banged against me, wheeled and coursed
in skewed orbits, I have seen pictures of
women running, their belongings tied
in scarves grasped in their fists, I blessed my
long legs he gave me, my strong
heart I abandoned to its own purpose,
I ran to Gate 17 and they were
just lifting the thick white
lozenge of the door to fit it into
the socket of the plane. Like the one who is not
too rich, I turned sideways and
slipped through the needle's eye, and then
I walked down the aisle toward my father. The jet
was full, and people's hair was shining, they were
smiling, the interior of the plane was filled with a
mist of gold endorphin light,
I wept as people weep when they enter heaven,
in massive relief. We lifted up

gently from one tip of the continent
and did not stop until we set down lightly on the
other edge, I walked into his room
and watched his chest rise slowly
and sink again, all night
I watched him breathe.

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 with the
wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips black 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 never 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 blank face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome blind 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.



The Daughter Goes to Camp

In the taxi alone, home from the airport,
I could not believe you were gone. My palm kept
creeping over the smooth plastic
to find your strong meaty little hand and
squeeze it, find your narrow thigh in the
noble ribbing of the corduroy,
straight and regular as anything in nature, to
find the slack cool cheek of a

child in the heat of a summer morning—
nothing, nothing, waves of bawling
hitting me in hot flashes like some
change of life, some boiling wave
rising in me toward your body, toward
where it should have been on the seat, your
brow curved like a cereal bowl, your
eyes dark with massed crystals like the
magnified scales of a butterfly's wing, the
delicate feelers of your limp hair,
floods of blood rising in my face as I
tried to reassemble the hot
gritty molecules in the car, to
make you appear like a holograph
on the back seat, pull you out of nothing
as I once did—but you were really gone,
the cab glossy as a slit caul out of
which you had slipped, the air glittering
electric with escape as it does in the room at a birth.

The Clasp

She was four, he was one, it was raining, we had colds,
we had been in the apartment two weeks straight,
I grabbed her to keep her from shoving him over on his
face, again, and when I had her wrist
in my grasp I compressed it, fiercely, for a couple
of seconds, to make an impression on her,
to hurt her, our beloved firstborn, I even almost
savored the stinging sensation of the squeezing,
the expression, into her, of my anger,
"Never, never, again," the righteous
chant accompanying the clasp. It happened very
fast--grab, crush, crush,
crush, release--and at the first extra
force, she swung her head, as if checking
who this was, and looked at me,
and saw me--yes, this was her mom,
her mom was doing this. Her dark,
deeply open eyes took me
in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment
she learned me. This was her mother, one of the
two whom she most loved, the two
who loved her most, near the source of love
was this.

In this next poem, Olds describes looking in wonder at a slug when she was a child.

The Connoisseuse of Slugs

When I was a connoisseuse of slugs
I would part the ivy leaves, and look for the
naked jelly of those gold bodies,
translucent strangers glistening along the
stones, slowly, their gelatinous bodies
at my mercy. Made mostly of water, they would shrivel
to nothing if they were sprinkled with salt,
but I was not interested in that. What I liked
was to draw aside the ivy, breathe the
odor of the wall, and stand there in silence
until the slug forgot I was there
and sent its antennae up out of its
head, the glimmering umber horns
rising like telescopes, until finally the
sensitive knobs would pop out the
ends, delicate and intimate. Years later,
when I first saw a naked man,
I gasped with pleasure to see that quiet
mystery reenacted, the slow
elegant being coming out of hiding and
gleaming in the dark air, eager and so
trusting you could weep.

Francis Ponge

Ponge has a strange, almost technical way of describing super elemental things.



Water

Below me, always below me is water. Always with lowered eye do I look at it. It is like the ground, like a part of the ground, a modification of the ground.

It is bright and brilliant, formless and fresh, passive yet persistent in its one vice, gravity; disposing of extraordinary means to satisfy that vice—twisting, piercing, eroding, filtering.

This vice works from within as well: water collapses all the time, constantly sacrifices all form, tends only to humble itself, flattens itself on the ground, like a corpse, like the monks of certain orders. Always lower—that could be its motto; the opposite of excelsior.

*

One might almost say that water is mad, because of its hysterical need to obey gravity alone, a need that possesses it like an obsession.

Of course, everything in the world responds to this need, which always and everywhere must be satisfied. This cabinet, for example, proves to be terribly stubborn in its desire to stay on the ground, and if one day it found itself badly balanced, would sooner fall to pieces than run counter to that desire. But to a certain degree it teases gravity, defies it; does not give way in all its parts: its cornice, its moldings do not give in. Inherent in the cabinet is a resistance that benefits its

personality and form.

LIQUID, by definition, is that which chooses to obey gravity rather than maintain its form, which rejects all form in order to obey gravity—and which loses all dignity because of that obsession, that pathological anxiety. Because of that vice—which makes it fast, flowing, or stagnant, formless or fearsome, formless *and* fearsome, piercingly fearsome in cases; devious, filtering, winding—one can do anything one wants with it, even lead water through pipes to make it spout out vertically so as to enjoy the way it collapses in droplets: a real slave.

The sun and the moon, however, are envious of this exclusive influence, and try to take over whenever water happens to offer the opening of great expanses, and above all when in a state of least resistance—spread out in shallow puddles. Then the sun exacts an even greater tribute: forces it into a perpetual cycle, treats it like a gerbil on a wheel.

*

Water eludes me...slips between my fingers. And even so! It's not even that clean (like a lizard or a frog): it leaves traces, spots, on my hands that are quite slow to dry or have to be wiped. Water escapes me yet marks me, and there is not a thing I can do about it.

Ideologically it's the same thing: it eludes me, eludes all definition, but in my mind and on this sheet leaves traces, formless marks.

*

Water's instability: sensitive to the slightest change of level. Running down stairs two at a time. Playful, childishly obedient, returning as soon as called if one alters the slope on this side.



The Horse

Many times the size of a man, the horse has flaring nostrils, round eyes under half-closed lids, cocked ears and long muscular neck.

The tallest of man's domestic animals, and truly his designated mount.

Man, somewhat lost on an elephant, is at his best on a horse, truly a throne to his measure.

We will not do away with the horse, I hope?

He will not become a curiosity in a zoo?

...Already now, in town, he is no more than a miserable substitute for the automobile, the most miserable means of traction.

Ah, the horse is also—does man suspect it?—something else besides! He is *impatience* nostrilized.

His weapons are running, biting, bucking.

He seems to have a keen nose, keen ears, and very sensitive eyes.

The greatest tribute one can pay him is having to fit him with blinders.

But no weapon...

Whereby the temptation to add one. One only. A horn. Thereby the unicorn.

The horse, terribly nervous, is aerophagous.

Hypersensitive, he clamps his jaws, holds his breath, then releases it, making the walls of his nasal cavities vibrate loudly.

That is why this noble beast, who feeds on air and grass alone, produces only straw turds and thunderous fragrant farts. Fragrant thunderisms.

What am I saying, feeds on air? Gets drunk on it. Sniffs it, savors it, snorts it.

He rushes into it, shakes his mane in it, kicks up his hind legs in it.
He would evidently like to fly up into it.

The flight of clouds inspires him, urges him to imitation.

He does imitate it: he tosses, prances...

And when the whip's lightning claps, the clouds gallop faster and rain tramples the earth
Out of your stall, high-spirited over-sensitive armoire, all polished and smoothed!

Great beautiful period piece!

Polished ebony or mahogany.

Stroke the withers of this armoire and immediately it has a faraway look.

Dust cloth at the lips, feather mop at the rump, key in the lock of the nostrils

His skin quivers, irritably tolerating flies, his shoe hammers the ground.

He lowers his head, leans his muzzle toward the ground and consoles himself with grass.

A stepstool is needed to look on the upper shelf.

Ticklish skin, as I was saying...but his natural impatience is so profound, that inside his body
the parts of his skeleton behave like pebbles in a torrent

Seen from the apse, the highest animal nave in the stable...

Great saint! Great horse! Beautiful behind in the stable...

What is this splendid courtesan's behind that greets me, set on slim legs, high heels?

Giant goose of the golden eggs, strangely clipped.

Ah, it is the smell of gold that assails my nostrils!

Leather and manure mixed together.

Strong-smelling omelette, from the goose of the golden eggs.

Straw omelette, earth omelette, flavored with the rum of your urine, dropping from the crack
under your tail...

As though fresh from the oven, on a pastry sheet, the stable's rolls and rum balls.

Great saint, with your Byzantine eyes, woeful, under the harness...

A sort of saint, humble monk at prayer, in the twilight.

A monk? What am I saying?...A pontiff, on his excremental palanquin! A pope—exhibiting to
all comers a splendid courtesan's behind, generously heart-shaped, on slender legs ending
elegantly in high-heeled shoes.

WHAT IS THIS CLACKING OF THE BIT?

THESE DULL THUDS IN THE STALL?

WHAT'S GOING ON?

PONTIFF AT PRAYER?

SCHOOLBOY IN DETENTION?

GREAT SAINTS! GREAT HORSES (HORSES OR HEROES?), OF THE BEAUTIFUL
BEHIND IN THE STABLE,

WHY, SAINTLY MONK, ARE YOU WEARING RIDING BREECHES?

—INTERRUPTED DURING HIS MASS, HE TURNED HIS BYZANTINE EYES
TOWARD US...

Seamus Heaney

Blackberry Picking

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

David St. John

Guitar

I have always loved the word *guitar*.

I have no memories of my father on the patio
At dusk, strumming a Spanish tune,
Or my mother draped in that fawn wicker chair
Polishing her flute;
I have no memories of your song, distant Sister
Heart, of those steel strings sliding
All night through the speaker of the car radio
Between Tucumcari and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Though I've never believed those stories
Of gypsy cascades, stolen horses, castanets,
And stars, of Airstream trailers and good fortune,
Though I never met Charlie Christian, though
I've danced the floors of cold longshoremen's halls,

Though I've waited with the overcoats at the rear
Of concerts for lute, mandolin, and two guitars—
More than the music I love scaling its woven
Stairways, more than the swirling chocolate of wood

I have always loved the word *guitar*.

Unknown Writer!

Siren

I became a criminal when I fell in love.
Before that I was a waitress.

I didn't want to go to Chicago with you.
I wanted to marry you, I wanted
Your wife to suffer.

I wanted her life to be like a play
In which all the parts are sad parts.

Does a good person
Think this way? I deserve

Credit for my courage--

I sat in the dark on your front porch.
Everything was clear to me:
If your wife wouldn't let you go
That proved she didn't love you.
If she loved you
Wouldn't she want you to be happy?

I think now
If I felt less I would be
A better person. I was
A good waitress.
I could carry eight drinks.

I used to tell you my dreams.
Last night I saw a woman sitting in a dark bus--
In the dream, she's weeping, the bus she's on
Is moving away. With one hand
She's waving; the other strokes
An egg carton full of babies.

The dream doesn't rescue the maiden.

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NOTES & IDEAS FOR YOUR POEMS

- Try a memory poem which, like some of Greg Orr's above, *refers to yourself in the third person*.
- Try a memory poem which, like Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," describes *a simple, single scene in a room*.
- Describe an object you remember from the recent or far past, and, like Charles Simic's "The Fork" or Pablo Neruda's odes, use *tons of detail and imaginative figurative language*.
- Try a memory poem which, like Tony Hoagland's "Adam and Eve," asks more questions than it answers. Ask real questions! *Let yourself think on paper*.