

ADAM ZAGAJEWSKI

1945—

*What follows is probably the shortest poem on the twentieth-century mania of visiting places, all over the earth, as tourists.*

AUTO MIRROR

In the rear-view mirror suddenly  
I saw the bulk of the Beauvais Cathedral;  
great things dwell in small ones  
for a moment.

*Translated from the Polish by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass*

TED KOOSER

1939—

*This poem, on a little town in Minnesota, is a synthetic image or even a collage. There is no single observer. First, we see the last car of a moving train, then we receive information about two lights in the darkness, one a bulb in the prison, the other a flashlight handled by an old woman going downstairs to the bathroom. And so altogether a province. The prison is an important building; an old house with cats belongs to a lone woman (the husband dead, children somewhere far away). Simultaneous images—moments are recaptured.*

LATE LIGHTS IN MINNESOTA

At the end of a freight train rolling away,  
a hand swinging a lantern.  
The only lights left behind in the town  
are a bulb burning cold in the jail,  
and high in one house,  
a five-battery flashlight  
pulling an old woman downstairs to the toilet  
among the red eyes of her cats.

OU YANG HSIU

1007-1072

*There's a considerable number of Chinese poems in this book, for a simple reason: the pictorial qualities of that poetry, expressed in close cooperation with a calligrapher and an artist. "Fisherman" is really like a painting. And in fact the poem has been "translated" into an image by the brush of a painter, many times imitated and often reproduced in books on Chinese art. Drizzle and mist form an obstacle to seeing clearly, and this reminds us that a seeing person—an observer—exists.*

FISHERMAN

The wind blows the line out from his fishing pole.  
In a straw hat and grass cape the fisherman  
Is invisible in the long reeds.  
In the fine spring rain it is impossible to see very far  
And the mist rising from the water has hidden the hills.

*Translated from the Chinese by Kenneth Rexroth*

GARY SNYDER

1030-

*This poem by Gary Snyder is like noting down what, precisely, happens; in other words, the time between seeing and noting is very short. The snowpeak changes color, shadows gather in the gorge, as if the writer sitting by the fire had an open notebook and tried to fix what he saw and what he, himself, was doing. Of course, the poem might not have been written at that moment in that landscape, but, rather, uses this device.*

LATE OCTOBER CAMPING IN THE SAWTOOTH

Sunlight climbs the snowpeak  
glowing pale red  
Cold sinks into the gorge  
shadows merge.  
Building a fire of pine twigs  
at the foot of a cliff,  
Drinking hot tea from a tin cup  
in the chill air—  
Pull on a sweater and roll a smoke.  
a leaf  
beyond fire  
Sparkles with nightfall frost.

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS  
1883-1963

*It is true that William Carlos Williams revolutionized American poetry by introducing his own form of current speech, based, presumably, on the rhythm of breathing. However, what is most important is his gift of living among people, the sympathy and empathy by which he is a sort of successor to Walt Whitman. Perhaps that is why he chose to be a physician, practicing general medicine in the town of Rutherford, New Jersey, where he was born. He looked, listened, observed, and tried to choose the simplest words for his notes on reality.*

#### PROLETARIAN PORTRAIT

A big young bareheaded woman  
in an apron

Her hair slicked back standing  
on the street

One stockinged foot toeing  
the sidewalk

Her shoe in her hand. Looking  
intently into it

She pulls out the paper insole  
to find the nail

That has been hurting her

JOHN HAINES  
1924-

*Anybody who has wandered in the mountains will recognize the precision of description in this poem by John Haines.*

#### ON THE MOUNTAIN

We climbed out of timber,  
bending on the steep meadow  
to look for berries,  
then still in the reddening sunlight  
went on up the windy shoulder.

A shadow followed us up the mountain  
like a black moon rising.  
Minute by minute the autumn lamps  
on the slope burned out.

Around us the air and the rocks  
whispered of night . . .

A great cloud blew from the north,  
and the mountain vanished  
in the rain and stormlit darkness.

## THIN ICE

by Gary Snyder

Walking in February  
 A warm day after a long freeze  
 On an old logging road  
 Below Sumas Mountain  
 Cut a walking stick of alder,  
 Looked down through clouds  
 On wet fields of the Nooksack—  
 And stepped on the ice  
 Of a frozen pool across the road.  
 It creaked  
 The white air under  
 Sprang away, long cracks  
 Shot out in the black,  
 My cleated mountain boots  
 Slipped on the hard slick  
 —like thin ice—the sudden  
 Feel of an old phrase made real—  
 Instant of frozen leaf,  
 Icewater, and staff in hand.  
 “Like walking on thin ice—”  
 I yelled back to a friend,  
 It broke and I dropped  
 Eight inches in

3/9/2021

A Step Away from Them by Frank O'Hara | Poetry Foundation



POETRY FOUNDATION

## A Step Away from Them

BY FRANK O'HARA

It's my lunch hour, so I go  
 for a walk among the hum-colored  
 cabs. First, down the sidewalk  
 where laborers feed their dirty  
 glistening torsos sandwiches  
 and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets  
 on. They protect them from falling  
 bricks, I guess. Then onto the  
 avenue where skirts are flipping  
 above heels and blow up over  
 grates. The sun is hot, but the  
 cabs stir up the air. I look  
 at bargains in wristwatches. There  
 are cats playing in sawdust.

On  
 to Times Square, where the sign  
 blows smoke over my head, and higher  
 the waterfall pours lightly. A  
 Negro stands in a doorway with a  
 toothpick, languorously agitating.  
 A blonde chorus girl clicks: he  
 smiles and rubs his chin. Everything  
 suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of  
 a Thursday.

Neon in daylight is a  
 great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would  
 write, as are light bulbs in daylight.  
 I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S  
 CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of  
 Federico Fellini, *è bell' attrice*.  
 And chocolate malted. A lady in  
 foxes on such a day puts her poodle  
 in a cab.

3/9/2021

A Step Away from Them by Frank O'Hara | Poetry Foundation

There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which makes it beautiful and warm. First Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the earth as full as life was full, of them? And one has eaten and one walks, past the magazines with nudes and the posters for BULLFIGHT and the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, which they'll soon tear down. I used to think they had the Armory Show there.

A glass of papaya juice and back to work. My heart is in my pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

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Source: *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1995)

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CH'IN KUAN

1049-1101

*Travel by water is older than other kinds of travel, and sailing has its honorable place in poetry—in China, too, testifying to the importance of rivers and canals in that country.*

ALONG THE GRAND CANAL

Hoar frost has congealed  
On the deck  
Of my little boat.  
The water  
Is clear and still.  
Cold stars beyond counting  
Swim alongside.  
Thick reeds hide the shore.  
You'd think you'd left the earth.  
Suddenly there breaks in  
Laughter and song.

*Translated from the Chinese by Kenneth Rexroth*

100 • CH'IN KUAN

*A considerable number of Chinese poems in my collection can be explained as my attempt to jump over the barrier built by time between them and us. In this I behave like many of my contemporaries who discover that what had been, until recently, the trappings of exoticism has masked the eternal man.*

AFTER GETTING DRUNK,  
BECOMING SOBER IN THE NIGHT

by Bai Juyi

Our party scattered at yellow dusk and I came home to bed;  
I woke at midnight and went for a walk, leaning heavily on a  
friend.  
As I lay on my pillow my vinous complexion, soothed by sleep,  
grew sober:  
In front of the tower the ocean moon, accompanying the tide, had  
risen.  
The swallows, about to return to the beams, went back to roost  
again;  
The candle at my window, just going out, suddenly revived its  
light.  
All the time till dawn came, still my thoughts were muddled;  
And in my ears something sounded like the music of flutes and  
strings.

*Translated from the Chinese by Arthur Waley*

NIECE by George Oppen

The streets of San Francisco,  
She said of herself, were my

Father and mother, speaking to the quiet guests  
In the living room looking down the hills

To the bay. And we imagined her  
Walking in the wooden past  
Of the western city . . . her mother

Was not that city  
But my elder sister. I remembered

The watchman at the beach  
Telling us the war had ended—

That was the first world war  
Half a century ago—my sister  
Had a ribbon in her hair.

LOUIS SIMPSON

1923-

*America, even for an American, may present itself in quite an alien manner, and the streets of big cities at night seem to contain the essence of alienation, which is faithfully conveyed by Louis Simpson's poem.*

AFTER MIDNIGHT

The dark streets are deserted,  
With only a drugstore glowing  
Softly, like a sleeping body;

With one white, naked bulb  
In the back, that shines  
On suicides and abortions.

Who lives in these dark houses?  
I am suddenly aware  
I might live here myself.

The garage man returns  
And puts the change in my hand,  
Counting the singles carefully.

LOUIS SIMPSON • 117

MID-AUGUST AT SOURDOUGH  
MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT

by Gary Snyder

Down valley a smoke haze  
Three days heat, after five days rain  
Pitch glows on the fir-cones  
Across rocks and meadows  
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read  
A few friends, but they are in cities.  
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup  
Looking down for miles  
Through high still air.

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

1931-

*A transformation of the landscape, and awareness of the alienation of man in new surroundings, transpire in this poem by Tranströmer.*

OUTSKIRTS

Men in overalls the same color as earth rise from a ditch.  
 It's a transitional place, in stalemate, neither country nor city.  
 Construction cranes on the horizon want to take the big leap, but  
 the clocks are against it.  
 Concrete piping scattered around laps at the light with cold  
 tongues.  
 Auto-body shops occupy old barns.  
 Stones throw shadows as sharp as objects on the moon surface.  
 And these sites keep on getting bigger  
 like the land bought with Judas' silver: "a potter's field for burying  
 strangers."

*Translated from the Swedish by Robert Bly*

RAYMOND CARVER

1938-1988

*Just before daybreak, when it is still dark, an electrical blackout causes the speaker to look outside at the landscape, which appears extraordinarily calm. The speaker feels pure inside at that moment. Later the same morning, electricity is restored and "things stood as they had before."*

THE WINDOW

A storm blew in last night and knocked out  
 the electricity. When I looked  
 through the window, the trees were translucent.  
 Bent and covered with rime. A vast calm  
 lay over the countryside.  
 I knew better. But at that moment  
 I felt I'd never in my life made any  
 false promises, nor committed  
 so much as one indecent act. My thoughts  
 were virtuous. Later on that morning,  
 of course, electricity was restored.  
 The sun moved from behind the clouds,  
 melting the hoarfrost.  
 And things stood as they had before.



WILLIAM STAFFORD

1914-1993

*Until recently, the train symbolized any travel, and that's why poets wrote so much about it. They were fascinated by landscapes, scenes moving beyond the window—mysterious because seen only for an instant. And so for William Stafford, a group of Indians out the window of the dining car reveals itself as the Other, with its own sequence of events (a funeral), which, for a short time only, crosses the sequence inside.*

VACATION

One scene as I bow to pour her coffee:—

Three Indians in the scouring drouth  
huddle at the grave scooped in the gravel,  
lean to the wind as our train goes by.  
Someone is gone.

There is dust on everything in Nevada.

I pour the cream.

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

1931—

*This poem by Tranströmer is the most literally spoken in the now, and it's so impressive that we forget to ask when—how long ago—the observer lived through it. It's like a snapshot, though enriched by things known from the past, in a dream or during illness.*

TRACKS

Night, two o'clock: moonlight. The train has stopped  
in the middle of the plain. Distant bright points of a town  
twinkle cold on the horizon.

As when someone has gone into a dream so far  
that he'll never remember he was there  
when he comes back to his room.

And as when someone goes into a sickness so deep  
that all his former days become twinkling points, a swarm,  
cold and feeble on the horizon.

The train stands perfectly still.  
Two o'clock: full moonlight, few stars.

*Translated from the Swedish by Robert Bly*

WANG CHIEN  
768-830

*If family is a microcosm of society, here we have a glimpse of old Chinese civilization. One can wonder at the stability of such relations as those between the daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law, and the husband's sister. The poem is very vivid and evocative, able to convey a complex relationship in a few lines.*

#### THE NEW WIFE

On the third day she went down to the kitchen,  
Washed her hands, prepared the broth.  
Still unaware of her new mother's likings,  
She asks his sister to taste.

*Translated from the Chinese by J. P. Seaton*

ANNA SWIR  
1909-1984

*Anna Swir is the author of a moving cycle of poems about her father and mother, of whom she speaks with attachment and gratitude, which seems to me striking in view of a common tendency, particularly among young poets today, toward just the opposite. It is not without importance to know her biography. She was the only daughter of a painter who was abysmally poor. She grew up in his atelier in Warsaw.*

#### I WASH THE SHIRT

For the last time I wash the shirt  
of my father who died.  
The shirt smells of sweat. I remember  
that sweat from my childhood,  
so many years  
I washed his shirts and underwear,  
I dried them  
at an iron stove in the workshop,  
he would put them on unironed.

From among all bodies in the world,  
animal, human,  
only one exuded that sweat.  
I breathe it in  
for the last time. Washing this shirt  
I destroy it  
forever.  
Now  
only paintings survive him  
which smell of oils.

*Translated from the Polish by Czeslaw Milosz and Leonard Nathan*

STEVE KOWIT

1938-

*What does it mean to realize that we are like all our fellow men, that closing ourselves off in our uniqueness, we are wrong, because whatever we feel, others feel too? It means to experience, be it for a moment, but in a truly sharp way, our common fate, the basic and inescapable fact of our mortality. Nothing is more obvious and yet rarely does a poet grasp it as the California poet Steve Kowit has in this joking-serious poem.*

NOTICE

This evening, the sturdy Levis  
 I wore every day for over a year  
 & which seemed to the end in perfect condition,  
 suddenly tore.  
 How or why I don't know,  
 but there it was—a big rip at the crotch.  
 A month ago my friend Nick  
 walked off a racquetball court,  
 showered,  
 got into his street clothes,  
 & halfway home collapsed & died.  
 Take heed you who read this  
 & drop to your knees now & again  
 like the poet Christopher Smart  
 & kiss the earth & be joyful  
 & make much of your time  
 & be kindly to everyone,  
 even to those who do not deserve it.  
 For although you may not believe it will happen,  
 you too will one day be gone.  
 I, whose Levis ripped at the crotch  
 for no reason,  
 assure you that such is the case.  
 Pass it on.

STEVE KOWIT • 199

RAYMOND CARVER

1938-1988

*The most classical poem of nonattachment is that of a sudden realization, in a flash, of the shortness of the time one has left to live.*

THE COBWEB

A few minutes ago, I stepped onto the deck  
 of the house. From there I could see and hear the water,  
 and everything that's happened to me all these years.  
 It was hot and still. The tide was out.  
 No birds sang. As I leaned against the railing  
 a cobweb touched my forehead.  
 It caught in my hair. No one can blame me that I turned  
 and went inside. There was no wind. The sea was  
 dead calm. I hung the cobweb from the lampshade.  
 Where I watch it shudder now and then when my breath  
 touches it. A fine thread. Intricate.  
 Before long, before anyone realizes,  
 I'll be gone from here.

RAYMOND CARVER

*The situation of amassed adversity—winter, evening, solitude, old age—can sometimes so depress that even a poet sure of himself feels the uselessness of writing. Those of us who have experienced such evenings will recognize ourselves in that voice.*

SNOW STORM    by Du Fu

Tumult, weeping, many new ghosts.  
Heartbroken, aging, alone, I sing  
To myself. Ragged mist settles  
In the spreading dusk. Snow scurries  
In the coiling wind. The wineglass  
Is spilled. The bottle is empty.  
The fire has gone out in the stove.  
Everywhere men speak in whispers.  
I brood on the uselessness of letters.

*Translated from the Chinese by Kenneth Rexroth*