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“Introduction to Poetry” by Billy Collins

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 waterski
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.

“Solitude” by Anna Akhmatova

So many stones have been thrown at me
That I'm not frightened of them any more,
And the pit has become a solid tower
Tall among tall towers.
I thank the builders,
May care and sadness pass them by.
From here I'll see the sunrise earlier,
Here the sun's last ray rejoices.
And into the windows of my room
The northern breezes often fly.
And from my hand a dove eats grains of wheat...
As for my unfinished page,
The Muse's tawny hand, divinely calm
And delicate, will finish it.

“The Icicles” by Janet Frame

Every morning I congratulate
the icicles on their severity.
I think they have courage, backbone,
their hard hearts will never give way.

Then around ten or half past,
hearing the steady drops of water
I look up at the eaves. I see
the enactment of the same old winter story
- the icicles weeping away their inborn tears,
and if they only knew it, their identity.

“The Wedding” by Maria Banus

In the bridal suite there was a black, cosmic cold.

Get undressed, I told him--to warm me.

First he unscrewed his head,

with the grinding of Saturn,

when it wants to escape the grip of the ring

or like a glass stopper,

which grates against the neck of a bottle.

He unscrewed his right arm.

like a pin from a grenade.

He unscrewed his left arm

like a slender metallic rocket.

He unscrewed his artificial limb from his right leg,

he unscrewed his artificial limb from his left leg, and iron groaned upon iron,

as it does in a boiler room.

I crawled near his heart, put my head on his chest, listened to his heart-beat.

It wasn't grinding, or clanging, or exploding, it was throbbing--

Blades of grass grew, unexpectedly,

the face of a hare appeared from hazel branches, a milky strip of cloud--and a sky.

Then, finally, we cried.

“The Little Box” by Vasko Popa

The little box grows her first teeth
And her little length grows
Her little width her little emptiness
And everything she has
The little box grows and grows
And now inside her is the cupboard
She was in before
And she grows and grows and grows
And now inside her is the room
And the house and town and land
And the world she was in before
The little box remembers her childhood
And by wishing really hard
Becomes a little box again
Now inside the little box
Is the whole world all teeny-weeny
Easy to slip in your pocket
Easy to steal easy to lose
Look after the little box

Mala kutija raste dalje
I sad je u njoj orman
U kome je ona bila
I raste dalje i dalje i dalje
I sad je u njoj soba
I kuća i grad i zemlja
I svet u kome je ona bila
Mala kutija seća se svog detinjstva
I od prevelike čežnje
Postaje opet mala kutija
Sada je u maloj kutiji
Geo svet mali malecan
Lako ga možete u džep staviti
Lako ukrasti lako izgubiti
Čuvajte malu kutiju

“The Last Supper” by Jacques Prevert (La Cène)

They are at table

They eat not

Nor touch their plates

And their plates stand straight up

Behind their heads.

Ils sont à table

Ils ne mangent pas

Ils ne sont pas dans leur assiette

Et leur assiette se tient toute droite

Verticalement derrière leur tête.

Translated by Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

“Barbara” by Jacques Prevert

Remember Barbara
It rained all day on Brest that day
And you walked smiling
Flushed enraptured streaming-wet
In the rain
Remember Barbara
It rained all day on Brest that day
And I ran into you in Siam Street
You were smiling
And I smiled too
Remember Barbara
You whom I didn't know
You who didn't know me
Remember
Remember that day still
Don't forget
A man was taking cover on a porch
And he cried your name
Barbara
And you ran to him in the rain
Streaming-wet enraptured flushed
And you threw yourself in his arms
Remember that Barbara
And don't be mad if I speak familiarly
I speak familiarly to everyone I love
Even if I've seen them only once
I speak familiarly to all who are in love
Even if I don't know them
Remember Barbara
Don't forget
That good and happy rain
On your happy face
On that happy town
That rain upon the sea

Rappelle-toi Barbara
Il pleuvait sans cesse sur Brest ce jour-là
Et tu marchais souriante
Épanouie ravie ruisselante
Sous la pluie
Rappelle-toi Barbara
Il pleuvait sans cesse sur Brest
Et je t'ai croisée rue de Siam
Tu souriais
Et moi je souriais de même
Rappelle-toi Barbara
Toi que je ne connaissais pas
Toi qui ne me connaissais pas
Rappelle-toi
Rappelle-toi quand même ce jour-là
N'oublie pas
Un homme sous un porche s'abritait
Et il a crié ton nom
Barbara
Et tu as couru vers lui sous la pluie
Ruisselante ravie épanouie
Et tu t'es jetée dans ses bras
Rappelle-toi cela Barbara
Et ne m'en veux pas si je te tutoie
Je dis tu à tous ceux que j'aime
Même si je ne les ai vus qu'une seule fois
Je dis tu à tous ceux qui s'aiment
Même si je ne les connais pas
Rappelle-toi Barbara
N'oublie pas
Cette pluie sage et heureuse
Sur ton visage heureux
Sur cette ville heureuse
Cette pluie sur la mer

Upon the arsenal
Upon the Ushant boat
Oh Barbara
What shitstupidity the war
Now what's become of you
Under this iron rain
Of fire and steel and blood
And he who held you in his arms
Amorously
Is he dead and gone or still so much alive
Oh Barbara
It's rained all day on Brest today
As it was raining before
But it isn't the same anymore
And everything is wrecked
It's a rain of mourning terrible and desolate
Nor is it still a storm
Of iron and steel and blood
But simply clouds
That die like dogs
Dogs that disappear
In the downpour drowning Brest
And float away to rot
A long way off
A long long way from Brest
Of which there's nothing left.

Sur l'arsenal
Sur le bateau d'Ouessant
Oh Barbara
Quelle connerie la guerre
Qu'es-tu devenue maintenant
Sous cette pluie de fer
De feu d'acier de sang
Et celui qui te serrait dans ses bras
Amouusement
Est-il mort disparu ou bien encore vivant
Oh Barbara
Il pleut sans cesse sur Brest
Comme il pleuvait avant
Mais ce n'est plus pareil et tout est abimé
C'est une pluie de deuil terrible et désolée
Ce n'est même plus l'orage
De fer d'acier de sang
Tout simplement des nuages
Qui crèvent comme des chiens
Des chiens qui disparaissent
Au fil de l'eau sur Brest
Et vont pourrir au loin
Au loin très loin de Brest
Dont il ne reste rien.

“One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII” by Pablo Neruda

I don't love you as if you were a rose of salt, topaz,
or arrow of carnations that propagate fire:

I love you as one loves certain obscure things,
secretly, between the shadow and the soul.

I love you as the plant that doesn't bloom but carries
the light of those flowers, hidden, within itself,
and thanks to your love the tight aroma that arose
from the earth lives dimly in my body.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where,
I love you directly without problems or pride:
I love you like this because I don't know any other way to love,
except in this form in which I am not nor are you,
so close that your hand upon my chest is mine,
so close that your eyes close with my dreams.

No te amo como si fueras rosa de sal, topacio
o flecha de claveles que propagan el fuego:

te amo como se aman ciertas cosas oscuras,
secretamente, entre la sombra y el alma.

Te amo como la planta que no florece y lleva
dentro de sí, escondida, la luz de aquellas flores,
y gracias a tu amor vive oscuro en mi cuerpo
el apretado aroma que ascendió de la tierra.

Te amo sin saber cómo, ni cuándo, ni de dónde,
te amo directamente sin problemas ni orgullo:
así te amo porque no sé amar de otra manera,
sino así de este modo en que no soy ni eres,
tan cerca que tu mano sobre mi pecho es mía,
tan cerca que se cierran tus ojos con mi sueño.

“Beach Burial” by Kenneth Slessor

Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs
The convoys of dead sailors come;
At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,
But morning rolls them in the foam.

Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness;

And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,
Bears the last signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity,
The words choke as they begin –

‘Unknown seaman’ – the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men’s lips,

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them together,
Enlisted on the other front.

“The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
[And be one traveler, long I stood]
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim;
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
[In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
[And that has made all the difference.

“A Mother in a Refugee Camp” by Chinua Achebe

No Madonna and Child could touch
Her tenderness for a son
She soon would have to forget. . . .
The air was heavy with odors of diarrhea,
Of unwashed children with washed-out ribs
And dried-up bottoms waddling in labored steps
Behind blown-empty bellies. Other mothers there
Had long ceased to care, but not this one:
She held a ghost-smile between her teeth,
And in her eyes the memory
Of a mother’s pride. . . . She had bathed him
And rubbed him down with bare palms.
She took from their bundle of possessions
A broken comb and combed
The rust-colored hair left on his skull
And then—humming in her eyes—began carefully to part it.
In their former life this was perhaps
A little daily act of no consequence
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it
Like putting flowers on a tiny grave.

“Not My Business” by Niyi Osundare

They picked Akanni up one morning
Beat him soft like clay
And stuffed him down the belly
Of a waiting jeep.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

They came one night
Booted the whole house awake
And dragged Danladi out,
Then off to a lengthy absence.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

Chinwe went to work one day
Only to find her job was gone:
No query, no warning, no probe -
Just one neat sack for a stainless record.

What business of mine is it
So long they don't take the yam
From my savouring mouth?

And then one evening
As I sat down to eat my yam
A knock on the door froze my hungry hand.

The jeep was waiting on my bewildered lawn
Waiting, waiting in its usual silence.

“Because I could not stop for Death” by Emily Dickinson

Because I could not stop for Death - He kindly stopped for me -
The carriage held but Ourselves - And Immortality.
We slowly drove- He knew no haste And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his civility -
We passed the School, where Children strove At Recess - in the Ring -
We passed the fields of Gazing Grain -
We passed the Setting Sun -
Or rather - He passed us -
The Dews drew quivering and chill -For only Gossamer, my Gown -
My Tippet - only Tulle-
We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground-
The Roof was scarcely visible -
The Cornice - in the Ground -
Since then - 'tis Centuries - and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity.

'The Right Word' by Imtiaz Dharker

Outside the door,
lurking in the shadows,
is a terrorist.
Is that the wrong description?
Outside that door,
taking shelter in the shadows,
is a freedom fighter.
I haven't got this right.
Outside, waiting in the shadows,
is a hostile militant.
Are words no more
than waving, wavering flags?
Outside your door,
watchful in the shadows,
is a guerrilla warrior.
God help me.
Outside, defying every shadow,
stands a martyr.
I saw his face.
No words can help me now.
Just outside the door,
lost in shadows,
is a child who looks like mine.
One word for you.
Outside my door,
his hand too steady,
his eyes too hard
is a boy who looks like your son, too.
I open the door.
Come in, I say.
Come in and eat with us.
The child steps in
and carefully, at my door,
takes off his shoes.