

A SAMPLER OF POETRY ROOTED IN EARTH

THE BEAUTY OF THINGS

To feel and speak the astonishing beauty of things—
earth, stone and water,
Beast, man and woman, sun, moon and stars—
The blood-shot beauty of human nature, its thoughts, frenzies and passions,
And unhuman nature its towering reality—
For man is half dream; man, you might say, is nature dreaming, but rock
And water and sky are constant—to feel
Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural
Beauty, is the sole business of poetry.
The rest's diversion: those holy or noble sentiments, the intricate ideas,
The love, lust, longing: reasons, but not the reason.

— Robinson Jeffers

THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS

— Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

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SONG OF THE TASTE

Eating the living germ of grasses
Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed
around the sperm of swaying trees

the muscles of the flanks and thighs of
soft-voiced cows
the bounce in the lamb's leap
the swish in the ox's tail

Eating roots grown swoll
inside the soil

Drawing on life of living
clustered points of light spun
out of space
hidden in the grape.

Eating each other's seed
eating
ah, each other.

Kissing the lover in the mouth of bread
lip to lip

— Gary Snyder in "Regarding Wave"

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ST. FRANCIS AND THE SOW

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as St. Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking
and blowing beneath them:
the long perfect loveliness of sow.

— Galway Kinnell

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OH, LOVELY ROCK

We stayed the night in the pathless gorge of Ventana Creek, up the east fork.
The rock walls and the mountain ridges hung forest on forest above our heads, maple and
redwood,
Laurel, oak, madrone, up to the high and slender Santa Lucian firs that stare up the cataracts
Of slide-rock to the star-color precipices.
We lay on gravel and kept a little campfire for warmth.
Past midnight only two or three coals glowed red in
 the cooling darkness; I laid a clutch of dead bay leaves
On the ember ends and felted dry sticks across them
 and lay down again. The revived flame
Lighted my sleeping son's face and his companion's, and the vertical
 face of the great gorge-wall
 Across the stream. Light leaves overhead danced in the fire's breath,
 tree-trunks were seen; it was the rock wall
That fascinated my eyes and mind. Nothing strange: light gray
 diorite with two or three slanting seams in it,
 Smooth-polished by the endless attrition of slides and
 floods; no fern nor lichen, pure naked rock...as
 if I were
 Seeing rock for the first time. As if I were seeing
 through the flame-lit surface into the real and bodily
And living rock. Nothing strange...I cannot
Tell you how strange: the silent passion, the deep
 nobility and childlike loveliness: this fate going on
Outside our fates. It is here in the mountain like a
 grave smiling child. I shall die and my boys
Will live and die, our world will go on through its
 rapid agonies of change and discovery, this age will die.
And wolves have howled in the snow around a new
 Bethlehem: this rock will be here, grave, earnest,
 not passive: the energies
 That are its atoms will still be bearing the whole
 mountain above; and I, many packed centuries ago
Felt its intense reality with love and wonder, this
 lonely rock.

— Robinson Jeffers

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THE ANSWER

Robinson Jeffers

Then what is the answer?—Not to be deluded by dreams,
To know that great civilizations have broken down into
violence, and their tyrants come, many times before.

When open violence appears, to avoid it with honor or choose
the least ugly faction; the evils are essential.

To keep one's own integrity, be merciful and uncorrupted
and not wish for evil; and not be duped
By dreams of universal justice or happiness. These dreams will
not be fulfilled.

To know this, and know that however ugly the parts appear the whole remains beautiful.
A severed hand is an ugly thing,
and man dissevered from the earth and stars
and his history—for contemplation or in fact—
often appears atrociously ugly.

Integrity is wholeness, the great beauty is
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things,
the divine beauty of the universe.

Love that, not man apart from that,
or else you will share man's pitiful
confusions, or drown in despair when his days darken.

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EARTH DWELLER

It was all the clods at once become
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,
and the windmill, my hands, the crack
Arlie made in the axe handle: oh, let me stay
here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all;
let the sun casually rise and set.
If I have not found the right place,
teach me, for, somewhere inside, the clods are
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing
for the saints forever, the shed and windmill
rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.

Now I know why people worship, carry around
magic emblems, wake up talking dreams
they teach to their children: the world speaks.
The world speaks everything to us.
It is our only friend.

—William Stafford

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ALL MORNING

Theodore Roethke

Here in our aging district the wood pigeon lives with us,
His deep-throated cooing part of the early morning,
Far away, close-at-hand, his call floating over the on-coming traffic,
The lugubriously beautiful plaint uttered at regular intervals,
A protest from the past, a reminder.

They sit, three or four, high in the fir-trees back of the house,
Flapping away heavily when a car blasts too close, ..
And one drops down to the garden, the high rhododendron,
Only to fly over to his favorite perch, the cross-bar of a telephone pole;
Grave, hieratic, a piece of Assyrian sculpture,
A thing carved of stone or wood, with the dull iridescence of long-
polished wood,
Looking at you without turning his small head,
With a round vireo's eye, quiet and contained,
Part of the landscape.

And the Steller jay, raucous, sooty headed, lives with us,
Conducting his long wars with the neighborhood cats,
All during mating season,
Making a racket to wake the dead,
To distract attention from the short-tailed ridiculous young ones
Hiding deep in the blackberry bushes—
What a scuttling and rapping along the drainpipes,
A fury of jays, diving and squawking,
When our spayed female cat yawns and stretches out in the sunshine—
And the wrens scold, and the chickadees frisk and frolic,
Pitching lightly over the high hedgerows, dee-deeing,
And the ducks near Lake Washington waddle down the highway after a
rain,

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Stopping traffic, indignant as addled old ladies,
Pecking at crusts and peanuts, their green necks glittering;
And the hummingbird dips in and around the quince tree,

Veering close to my head,
Then whirring off sideways to the top of the hawthorn,
Its almost-invisible wings, buzzing, hitting the loose leaves
intermittently—

A delirium of birds!
Peripheral dippers come to rest on the short grass,
Their heads jod-jodding like pigeons;
The gulls, the gulls far from their waves
Rising, wheeling away with harsh cries,
Coming down on a patch of lawn:

It is neither spring nor summer: it is Always,
With towhees, finches, chickadees, California quail, wood doves,
with wrens, sparrows, juncos, cedar waxwings, flickers,
With Baltimore orioles, Michigan bobolinks,
And those birds forever dead,
The passenger pigeon, the great auk, the Carolina parakeet,
All birds remembered, O never forgotten!
All in my yard, of a perpetual Sunday,
All morning! All morning!

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A LIGHT BREATHER

Theodore Roethke

The spirit moves,
Yet stays:
Stirs as a blossom stirs,
Still wet from its bud-sheath,
Slowly unfolding,
Turning in the light with its tendrils;
Plays as a minnow plays,
Tethered to a limp weed, swinging,
Tail around, nosing in and out of the current,
Its shadows loose, a watery finger;
Moves, like the snail,
Still inward,
Taking and embracing its surroundings,
Never wishing itself away,
Unafraid of what it is,
A music in a hood,
A small thing,
Singing.

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A BLESSING

James Wright

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their
happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the
darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

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GROUSE BELOW THE SKY, AUGUST

John Caddy

Lake of the Woods, Ontario

When they stretch up to pluck rose hips
and tender leaves how tall and lean are
the fledglings foraging with mother.
In the open one of the nine is always looking up.
They weave in and out of popple and brush
and pine, on and off the trail's gravel.
The mother makes a soft continual cluck
low in her throat with her beak closed,
the chicks open their beaks to a high
piping that nearly can't be heard.
Above the mother's bright eye
the skin is a fine featherless pink.
The fledglings have grown all their cryptic plumage
except the fan, and all their legs feather
to the foot, the habit of the north.
At any alarm, the mother cluck darkens
and the young rush shadow, go still
and wait for her clear call.
As they work open patches all look up
over and over, not a head cock—the whole
long neck curves to one side to look and look
well, as if aware a piece of sky could any moment
turn dark and fall in the shape of a hawk.

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OLD BACHELOR OFFERINGS

John Caddy

He rises from the slough like history,
cattails sluicing from his shell.
The huge snapper rises breathing, bubbles on the nostrils,
gusty breaths blessing lungs
empty all the icelocked darkness,
since ice first sang thinly in November wind,
and thickened, and locked him in.
Sluggish he comes from the silence of waiting,
where the year slowly rotted
and sifted down to coat his shell,
where he lay dim for months like an ancient stone.

But this is waking: now
he pushes clumps of ice aside, black honeycombs
dissolving into sun and muskrats' paddling,
now he staggers through sedgemat and mud
dragging long algae streamers.
He is cloaked with leeches, festooned with black
twisting, recoiling from sudden brightness and heat.
He stops and gusts air, snorkel nose straining high.
In a straight line he flounders on, crushing cattails under him.

Weedslap: jerks his head in, stops. Rotates his eyes.
Old man gumming his jaws, he works his beak from side to side,
cautions his head out, and shoves his way up the gravel bank,
lifting his bulk step by step and sliding back, clawing up again
all pitted plates and scales the color of drying algae
beneath the frantic, tiring leeches. He breaks the crest
and gasping sprawls, clusters of snails huddled
in loose folds of skin

like an old bachelor lumberjack
in baggy longjohns winterstained
all the colors of a deeryard thaw,
who buttonless had sewn himself into them
last November, logged in them,
cooked in them, spilled on them,
slept the long incontinent darknesses in them
until they were both a season's record
and a second skin.

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He sags at an oilclothed table next to a stove,
one bony hand resting in a net of sunlight,
chapped pores open to this heat.
His hand knows it is almost May
and time to shed the winter skin,
time to bare himself to sun
that winter burn from him.
The fingers curl and drum.

A flap of longjohns!
and he's leaping out the door
to purge himself in sunlight
on the matted grass,
He whirls barefoot among stumps
in the madness of Spring,
reeling at his chest
but he can't find the threads,
finds a rent and rips it wide,
shucks them to his ankles,
hopping in gaunt arabesques.
Like a boy he hurls up his arms,
stretching blue shadowed ribs,
and offers his paleness to the sun.
But his lungs cannot catch
this trembling air, he weaves
exhausted spirals toward a center
where he sinks

so the old bachelor drags himself,
abrading his sunken plastron with winter debris.
He knows this hurts, he knows this is laborious,
he knows his stomach is a shriveled kernel in his gut,
but he knows the sun is here and he has to get the damned things off.
He lumbers into light, crushing last year under him.

He scrapes and burns the winter from his shell and skin,
a trail of leeches, snails and algae threads dropping
as he ploughs another hundred yards.
On a mat of snow-flattened grass he stops to bask,

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ragged legs outstretched, tendons in his neck
stretching the sun as it weaves from side to side.
With a hind foot he shoves himself in a slow revolution,
catching brilliance in the darkest pockets of his skin.

Enough. He takes his bearings
and lurches back along his path. Stops. Notices.
What are these black dying questions curled in wintered grass?
He noses one, snaps and gulps, and pushes off toward the slough.
He has made his offering.
They were Winter. Who thinks in Spring?

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MANITOU RIVER: CASCADES

John Caddy

The river oxbows lazy a half mile back, but a murmur swells.
The water at the brim slides black into chaos.
molten glass drops sleek as otter fur into white tumble,
stunning loudness at first but a roar you soon enter.

Above, where water is flat, a few fishflies hover up, down,
flutter off, two waxwings sit an overhanging branch,
sunglow through their crests, a monarch flits the edges
among the fragment shadows of leaning birches, calm

until the cataract below hammers the ear, the whirl and surge
and leap into shapes sculpted from water ever replaced but
whose shapes remain through this season,
water sculpted by water-carved rock.

All down the cascades, rock-sprung roots
of small trees penetrate the basalt of the riverbed,
their slow patience returning the delicate leaf and flower
of mountain ash, birch catkin, cedar fan.

Below, a huge foam pillow rotates in eddies,
yellow-brown points on top like baked meringue.
In a stone pool on a rock between chutes,
air bubbles coat the rusty bottom algae.

All this water moving, always the spray, droplets
fling themselves over and over into morning sun.
The cascade constant is power's crash,
the still pools worn in stone off to the sides a relief.

Water strider's boatfooted shadow
jerk-skates across the smooth bottom of one pool,
a mirror of six dimples from his small gravity.
He lives above this constant tension that never breaks.

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MANITOU RIVER: RUFFLED GROUSE

John Caddy

He'd drum on the log,
strut slow to its end,
jump down and vanish
in green, run all the way
through his hollow log, pop up
on the original end,
and drum and strut
his way down the log again,
feathers large as the season,
and each time
he closed this circle, he
untied a knot inside him
he had to untie.
The season feels familiar.

We trespassed on his
drumming ground,
hiking through, and stopped
to soak in this music
of feather and wood,
this wonderful dance of male.
He saw us and exploded
through trees, flew right
at our faces, tail fanned
and neck pouches
swollen to purple,
and beat our heads
with his wings until

he routed us, willing
as we were to run
in our grinning delight,
ears slapped red
and chest feathers
floating in our eyes,
in this drum season
so lovely and knotted
and loud, and so familiar.

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MANITOU RIVER: FOREST LIGHT

John Caddy

Light falls through cedars
to pool on the forest floor
and lift upward in shafts
whose edges spark
as small papery butterflies
cross and vanish in shade.
Nothing glows like a fern
caught by forest light
except rusty leaves, bluebeads,
mountain maple candles rising
out of leafy spillways,
the intense red shoots of sarsaparilla,
dwarf cornel and starflower,
soft white dewberry blooms
dusted with gold,
the epiphanic greens
of mossed stumps and stones
and old root thrusts.
Only the weight of leaf shadow
on all this green life
holds it from leaping up
into this boreal light.

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