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A Snowfall of Winter Poems

Editor's note: Following is Classic book note #87 on winter poetry by Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth. The Jefferson first published it on Feb. 3, 2022.



What's your favorite winter poem?

What about this one?

Winter solitude

by Matsuo Basho

Winter solitude –
in a world of one color
the sound of wind. [1]

Arthur Sze, the subject of [Jan. 27 Book Notes](#), would appreciate Basho's distillation of winter's monochromatic beauty accentuated by the sound of that which you cannot see – the wind tracing tiny drift lines across the snow-covered pond just outside my window. Recognized as the greatest master of haiku, Basho was a 17th century Japanese poet noted for “encapsulating the feeling of a scene in a few simple elements.” [2]

Or this one by Linda Gregg, which works the same attention to detail as Basho, albeit with considerably more words and considerably less elegance.

Winter Love

by Linda Gregg

I would like to decorate this silence,
but my house grows only cleaner
and more plain. The glass chimes I hung
over the register ring a little
when the heat goes on.
I waited too long to drink my tea.
It was not hot. It was only warm. [3]

Married for many years to the poet Jack Gilbert, Gregg spent five years with him in Greece avoiding fame in the Greek Isles. After their marriage ended, she lived a nomadic life teaching at various institutions including the University of California (Berkeley), Columbia University, Princeton University, and the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. Gregg said of her own writing that “the art of finding in poetry is the art of marrying the sacred to the world, the invisible to the human.” [4]

In the past two **Book Notes**, we've looked at the poetry of [Amanda Gorman](#) and [Arthur Sze](#). Next week we'll briefly look at the history of Valentine's Day by asking how a Roman fertility ritual morphed into a Christian holiday then morphed again into the foremost secular celebration of romantic love and along the way revisit some of the great love poems of the last half millennium. Then, as February turns towards March, in several different **Book Notes** we will look at Henry Kissinger's recent examination of the social impact of artificial

intelligence, the biographies of two 19th century women about whom I am all but certain many readers have never heard, but who, nonetheless, played a profound role in shaping the lives of 21st century American women, and one or two of the books piling up on the table behind me.

But, for today, what is your favorite winter poem?

No explication this week – no talking about what this or that poem might mean, just a sharing of some of my favorite poems about winter. As I write this, it is, according to the Weather Channel, 22 degrees in Erie, Pennsylvania, and as I look out my window a gentle but steady snow is falling. Which brings to mind this poem by Mary Oliver:

from White Eyes

... So, it's over.

In the pine-crown
he makes his nest,
he's done all he can.

I don't know the name of this bird,
only imagine his glittering beak
tucked in a white wing
while the clouds –

which he has summoned
from the north –
which he has taught
to be mild, and silent –

thicken, and begin to fall
into the world below
like stars, or the feathers
of some unimaginable bird

that loves us,
that is asleep now, and silent –
that has turned itself
into snow. [5]

As with any topic, the internet is awash in lists of ten best winter poems like Robert Lee Brewer's ***10 Best Winter Poems for Poets and Lovers of Poetry at Writers' Digest***. Among Brewer's picks are several of which I am particularly fond, such as Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man," which we have referenced in several previous ***Book Notes***, Pablo Neruda's "Horses," Emily

Dickinson's "It sifts from Leaden Sieves," and, of course, Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening." [6]

If the poet's gift is to show and not tell, then few were better than Emily Dickinson, who, as Brewer notes, in "It sifts from Leaden Sieves –" "without once using the word 'snow,' Dickinson writes about 'it' in beautiful imagery." [7] Oliver Tearle, in *10 Great Winter Poems Everyone Should Read*, adds "a beautiful description of the way snow obscures familiar objects, rendering them strange and ghostly to us. Who but Dickinson would have thought to describe snow as 'alabaster wool'?" [8]

It sifts from Leaden Sieves –

It sifts from Leaden Sieves –
It powders all the Wood.
It fills with Alabaster Wool
The Wrinkles of the Road –

It makes an Even Face
Of Mountain, and of Plain –
Unbroken forehead from the East
Unto the East again –

It reaches to the Fence –
It wraps it Rail by Rail
Till it is lost in Fleeces –
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack – and Stem –
A Summer's empty Room –
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,
Recordless, but for them –

It ruffles Wrists of Posts
As Ankles of a Queen –
Then stills its Artisans – like Ghosts –
Denying they have been – [9]

Pablo Neruda's "Horses" contrasts the dank cold of a Berlin winter with the life affirming energy proffered by the sight of 10 horses running amidst the gloom.

Horses

by Pablo Neruda

From the window I saw the horses.

I was in Berlin, in winter. The light

had no light, the sky had no heaven.

The air was white like wet bread.

And from my window a vacant arena,
bitten by the teeth of winter.

Suddenly driven out by a man,
ten horses surged through the mist.

Like waves of fire, they flared forward
and to my eyes filled the whole world,
empty till then. Perfect, ablaze,
they were like ten gods with pure white hoofs,
with manes like a dream of salt.

Their rumps were worlds and oranges.

Their color was honey, amber, fire.

Their necks were towers
cut from the stone of pride,
and behind their transparent eyes
energy raged, like a prisoner.

There, in silence, at mid-day,
in that dirty, disordered winter,
those intense horses were the blood
the rhythm, the inciting treasure of life.

I looked. I looked and was reborn:
for there, unknowing, was the fountain,
the dance of gold, heaven
and the fire that lives in beauty.

I have forgotten that dark Berlin winter.

I will not forget the light of the horses. [10]

Virtually every list of good, great, or best winter poems has among its top three both Wallace Stevens' "The Snow Man" and Robert Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening," which, reminiscent of our discovery in several previous **Book Notes** that many of our favorite Christmas carols were written during heat waves, Frost wrote in June. [11] Frost's poem works the tension between the woods as emblem of freedom and the speaker's recognition of his obligations and responsibilities, which, as the last two lines make clear, prevail.

Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening

by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep. [12]

An insurance executive moonlighting as one of the great poets of the 20th century, Stevens' "The Snow Man" defines meditative discipline in American English. It's been called the finest poem written by an American, which is a bit of a stretch, but only a bit. Regardless, it remains a beautiful expression of stilling the mind's "busyness" in order to be *present-to-the-present*, in order to *be here now*.

The Snow Man

by Wallace Stevens

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow.

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind

That is blowing in the same bare place
For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. [13]

Kathleen Jamie's "The Dipper" works a similar vein.

The Dipper

by Kathleen Jamie

It was winter, near freezing,
I'd walked through a forest of firs
when I saw issue out of the waterfall
a solitary bird.

It lit on a damp rock,
and, as water swept stupidly on,
wrung from its own throat
supple, undammable song.

It isn't mine to give.
I can't coax this bird to my hand
that knows the depth of the river
yet sings of it on land. [14]

Those of us who live along a great lake, which gives us glorious summers and winters of gray gloom, understand well Richard Meier's sudden joy at a morning of unexpected winter sunshine tempered by life's fragility.

Winter Morning

by Richard Meier

Shyly coated in greys, blacks, browns –
to keep us out of sight of the cold –
we weren't expecting this this morning: sun

and shadows, like a summer's evening, like summer
teasing. And not quite under the shelter on
the northbound platform, an old man, the sun

behind him, just his crown ablaze; and heading
southbound, a woman inching ever nearer
the platform edge, the light a tear

across her midriff, ribcage, shoulders, closer
and closer that dearest thing, completeness,
all her darkness light at the one time. [15]

There is an ambivalence, maybe more than an ambivalence about how poets use winter as a metaphor for love, whether from Richard Wilbur's "Winter will be feasts and fires in the shut houses,/ Lovers with hot mouths in their blanched bed,/Prayers and poems made, and all recourses/Against the world huge and dead" [16], or more banally phrased "love conquers all" to Shakespeare's "How like a winter hath my absence been/From thee, the pleasure of a fleeting year!/ What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!" [17], or, again, more banally "I miss you." Channeling Shakespeare's "Thou mayest in me behold/When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/Upon those boughs which shake against the cold ...," Delmore Schwartz laments a youthful, unrequited love:

from The Winter Twilight, Glowing Black and Gold
by Delmore Schwartz

That time of year you may in me behold
When Christmas trees are blazing on the walk,
Raging against stale snow and the cold
And low sky's bundled wash, deadwhite as chalk ...

At noon the fifth year is again abused:
I bring a distant girl apples and cake,
Marbles, pictures, secrets, my swollen heart
Now boxed in the learning and music of art:

But once more, as before, accepted and refused. [17]

Then there is Walt Whitman singing of love requited on a winter night:

A GLIMPSE, through an interstice caught,
Of a crowd of workmen and drivers in a bar-room, around the stove,
late of a winter night – And I unremark'd seated in a corner;
Of a youth who loves me, and whom I love, silently approaching, and
seating himself near, that he may hold me by the hand;
A long while, amid the noises of coming and going – of drinking and
oath and smutty jest,
There we two, content, happy in being together, speaking little,
perhaps not a word. [18]

Snow can also be a source of linguistic fun, as Lisel Mueller explores in "Not Only The Eskimos." In our fractious times, it is now not permissible to claim that the Eskimos and Inuit people have several hundred words – depending on the definition of word – for the varieties of snow, but playing with words, Mueller finds joy in cataloging snow's many varieties.

from Not Only The Eskimos

by Lisa Mueller

We have only one noun
but as many different kinds:

the grainy snow of the Puritans
and snow of soft, fat flakes,

guerrilla snow, which comes in the night
and changes the world by morning,

rabbinical snow, a permanent skullcap
on the highest mountains,

snow that blows in like the Lone Ranger,
riding hard from out of the West,

surreal snow in the Dakotas,
when you can't find your house, your street,
though you are not in a dream
or a science-fiction movie,

snow that tastes good to the sun
when it licks black tree limbs,
leaving us only one white stripe,
a replica of a skunk,

unbelievable snows:
the blizzard that strikes on the tenth of April ... [19]

As Billy Collins knows and as any schoolchild (and many teachers, too) can tell
you, snow can be a source of joy and liberation.

from Snow Day
by Billy Collins

Today we woke up to a revolution of snow,
its white flag wavering over everything,
the landscape vanished,
not a single mouse to puncture the blankness,
and beyond these windows

the government buildings smothered,
schools and libraries buried, the post office lost
under the noiseless drift,
the paths of trains softly blocked,
the world fallen under this falling ...

But for now I am a willing prisoner in this house,
a sympathizer with the anarchic cause of snow.
I will make a pot of tea
and listen to the plastic radio on the counter,
as glad as anyone to hear the news

that the Kiddie Corner School is closed ... [20]

In the **Book Notes** about [Amanda Gorman](#), I made the comment that poets who are famous young but do not die young end up Stephen Vincent Benet or Sara Teasdale. Upon reflection, that wisecrack erred in a number of ways, including the fact that both Teasdale and Benet did, indeed, die young, or at least relatively young. Suffering from pneumonia, which in pre-antibiotic 1933 was a grievous illness, Teasdale was dead at 49 of suicide; Benet died at 44 in 1943 of a heart attack. Both were famous young – Benet published his first book of poetry at the age of 17 and Teasdale published her first book at 23 and won the forerunner to the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 1918 at the age of 33. [21]

So, in partial atonement for that egregious slight to two fine poets, let's close out this snowfall of winter poems with a love poem by Sara Teasdale.

A Winter Bluejay

by Sara Teasdale

Crisply the bright snow whispered,
Crunching beneath our feet;
Behind us as we walked along the parkway,
Our shadows danced,
Fantastic shapes in vivid blue.
Across the lake the skaters
Flew to and fro,
With sharp turns weaving
A frail invisible net.
In ecstasy the earth
Drank the silver sunlight;
In ecstasy the skaters
Drank the wine of speed;
In ecstasy we laughed
Drinking the wine of love.
Had not the music of our joy
Sounded its highest note?
But no,
For suddenly, with lifted eyes you said,
"Oh look!"

There, on the black bough of a snow flecked maple,
Fearless and gay as our love,
A bluejay cocked his crest!
Oh who can tell the range of joy
Or set the bounds of beauty? [22]

What's your favorite winter poem? Let me know at Roth@JESerie.org and we'll say farewell to winter with a March **Book Notes** of reader favorites, which in Erie is always a risk for, as Lisa Mueller noted, it can snow in April!



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End Notes

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