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Book Notes #70

August 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

More Readers' Favorite Poems

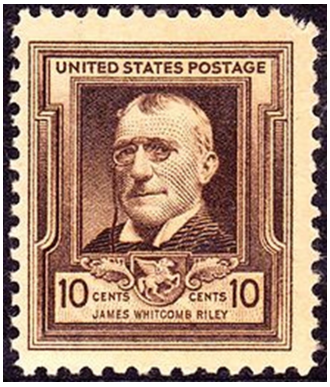
It's almost the middle of August, which means we're nearing summer's end (although in the age of climate change that might no longer hold as October, while not exactly steamy, has been warm as of late). I just thought it time for a poetry break to refresh the spirit in anticipation of the year's best season – autumn.

But today, we'll have no autumnal poems. We'll save that for later.

OK, maybe just one – (cliché warning!): what about *an old chestnut?*

After that, we'll look at Eileen's suggestion of Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias,* which every politician and wannbe authoritarian – left and right – should be compelled to read every night before retiring and every morning upon rising. Then, following Paul's suggestion, we'll look at two or three by Langston Hughes and one by Stanley Kunitz recommended by Roz.

We'll conclude with one or two by a poet with whom I have just become familiar. New to me, Arthur Sze is elbowing his way into my circle of favorites. Actually, I can't imagine Arthur Sze "elbowing" his way anywhere; while scarcely passive, he needn't "elbow" because the quiet force of his presence earns attention.



First, (cliché warning) that *old chestnut*: James Whitcomb Riley's *The Frost Is on the Punkin*. Yes, it's only Aug. 12, but we of the north know that the frost is on the way.

James Whitcomb Riley (1849-1916) – who earned the sobriquet the "Hoosier Poet" for his ability to imitate rural Indiana dialects – wrote numerous books of poetry, including *The Old Swimmin'-Hole, Riley Child-Rhymes*, *Out to Old Aunt Mary's*, and *An Old Sweetheart.* A journalist by profession, Riley said his journalistic work gave him insight into human nature because "The world with its excellence and follies flows through the reportorial rooms. … Thus, I was brought into contact with all the phases of life." [1] He wrote poems for children and adults, but "his poetry is especially prized for its sometimes-whimsical reflection of small-town America and … its insights and humor." [2]

As August wears on and autumn approaches, Riley's *When the Frost is on the Punkin* puts all of that on display: small-town America, humor, and insight.

from When the Frost is on the Punkin

When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock,
And you hear the kyouck and gobble of the struttin' turkey-cock,
And the clackin' of the guineys, and the cluckin' of the hens,
And the rooster's hallylooyer as he tiptoes on the fence;
O, it's then's the times a feller is a-feelin' at his best,
With the risin' sun to greet him from a night of peaceful rest,
As he leaves the house, bareheaded, and goes out to feed the stock,
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock.

They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here—
Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossums on the trees,
And the mumble of the hummin'-birds and buzzin' of the bees;
But the air's so appetizin'; and the landscape through the haze
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airly autumn days
Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock. [3]

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Striking a much more serious note is Eileen's recommendation of Shelley's *Ozymandias,* that favorite of college poetry survey courses when going to college still meant getting educated to live a life and not simply "facilitated" to earn a living. With Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, William Blake, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley was among the greatest of the

English Romantic poets. His stature, to the extent "stature" means anything, is such that he is one of those rare artists known simply by their surname – "Shelley."

Like Byron, he was extremely handsome and lived, in a vast understatement, an unconventional life. In some ways he and Bryon invented the romantic notion of the poet as artist flouting convention and living on society's margins while reaping its rewards. His wife Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, or the *Modern Prometheus*, and was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, the 18th century proto-feminist who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Shelley was a master of long form poetry, such as *Queen Mab,* which described what a utopian society might look like, and the author of many staples of English literature survey courses, such as *Ode to the West Wind*. A political radical, he advocated atheism, vegetarianism, and sexual freedom. He also wrote political pamphlets and literary criticism, the most important of which is *In Defence of Poetry*. In it, Shelley famously asserts that poets (i.e. artists) are the world's unacknowledged legislators.

Although I have never been a particular fan of Shelley, he merits more than this cursory biography. Perhaps he will be the subject of a future ***Book Notes***. His *Ozymandias*, however, is a brilliant example of the use of dramatic irony, symbol, and paradox both to make a point and to make it with emotional impact in far fewer words than a prosy discourse on human vanity and fame's fleeting nature. As I have said before, explication can kill a poem and paraphrase, if not kill it, leave it on the floor gasping for breath, but *Ozymandias* uses the symbol – something which stands for more than it literally is – of the sunken Sphinx and the irony – the opposite of what one would expect – of its decrepitude to signal the paradox that the greatest of conquerors, like all humans, ends up simply dust.

No more explication, here is Shelley on the truth of *sic transit gloria mundi*:

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said — "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. ... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away." [4]

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In last week's ***Book Notes*** discussing Samuel Goldman's ***After Nationalism***,

we briefly examined one of the major threads in the American story – "The American Creed." The creed defines American nationality not as "blood and soil" but as a shared belief in a set of ideals, those truths we hold: the equality of all people, individual rights guaranteed in a society governed by the rule of law. That creed gave rise, in part, to the American Dream of a just society recognizing the dignity of all people.

As we all know, America and Americans have not always been true to their creed, but it remains the lodestar almost all Americans seek. Its greatest expression might have been Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, but before Martin Luther King, Jr. there was Langston Hughes' *I Dream a World.*

I Dream a World

I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,
Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.
I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom's way,
Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.
A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,
Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,
Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,
Attends the needs of all mankind –
Of such I dream, my world. [5]

A major figure in the 1920s' Harlem Renaissance, Hughes, one of America's most important poets, began writing in high school at Cleveland (Ohio) Central High School – "the first school west of the Alleghenies to provide free secondary education at public expense." [6] Like Shelley, in a future ***Book Notes*** Hughes merits an in-depth treatment, as both his family history prior to his arrival in Cleveland in 1916 and his own personal history speak of the complex nature of the Black experience in America and Hughes' experience as a Black man, a gay Black man and a great artist in an America not always certain what to make of him or to do with him. An early pioneer in what he and others called jazz poetry – "poetry that demonstrates jazz-like rhythm or the feel of improvisation" [7] – Hughes was one of the first to encourage Black artists to find inspiration in their experience of being black not only in America but globally. He advocated for Black pride and "a racial consciousness devoid of hate," [8] as in what has become known as his signature poem:

from The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in

human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to
New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in
the sunset.

I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers. [9]

We'll revisit Hughes at some length in a future ***Book Notes*** focusing solely on him, but for now let's note that while hopeful that America would somehow figure out how to envelope ***all*** of its people in its ideals of liberty, equality, and the rule of law, he was not naïve. If his dream of a world "I dream …" failed to materialize, if it continued to be deferred and denied, then, like the ancient prophets, he understood what might ensue.

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode? [10]

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Although an academic, Stanley Kunitz's poetry is not by any measure academic. It is neither mannered nor dusty nor preening – that coy way some poets have of saying without ever really saying it, "Hey, look at me, aren't I witty?" No, Kunitz's poetry is plain, in the best sense of that word – clean, lacking in ornamentation, simply saying what needs to be said and not a word more.

Recommended by Roz, who at 83 continues to teach and to discover new layers of self, in *The Layers* Kunitz talks about the pangs of aging – "When I look

behind … the slow fires trailing from abandoned camp sites" – and, less melodramatically than Dylan Thomas' *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night*, he looks to the future as he turns "exulting somewhat … to go/wherever I need to go." Beyond his many accomplishments as a poet, teacher and gardener, what makes his will to go forward special is that he was born in 1905, became U.S. Poet Laureate in 2000 and died in 2006 at age 100.
Kunitz exemplifies what Picasso meant when, on the occasion of his 90th birthday, a reporter asked him why, since he was already recognized as the great artist of the century, he kept working so hard in his studio, he replied, "I'm not finished."

Neither was Stanley Kunitz, when in 1978 at age 73 he wrote:

THE LAYERS

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.
When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.
Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?
In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.
Yet I turn, I turn
exulting somewhat
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.
In my darkest night
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through the wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."
Though I lack the art

to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes. [11]

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And, if you are "not done with your changes," you will need to hone your observational skills. Poetry can help you do that, for the greatest poets by the energy of their presence help one become more *present-to-the-present*. Recently, I discovered a contemporary master of being *present-to-the-present*, someone who needs no exhortation to "be here now."

Speaking of discovery, one of the joys of real bookstores, as opposed to online bookstores of any variety, is the joy of browsing. Browsing in the poetry section of a bookstore in Cleveland, I discovered Arthur Sze's ***Sightlines***. For some reason, and the shame is on me, I had never read Arthur Sze. So, navigating my own changes in my eighth decade, I am now immersed in reading Sze's ***Sightlines***, in addition to his ***The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970-1998*** and ***Compass Rose***.

As Naomi Shihab Nye is quoted on Sze's page at **Poets.org** "Arthur Sze's work has long been a nourishing tonic for the mind – presences of the natural world, wide consciousness, and time, combine in exquisitely shaped and weighted lines and stanzas to create a poetry of deep attunement and lyrical precision." [12]

We'll conclude this ***Book Notes*** with Arthur Sze's:

First Snow

A rabbit has stopped on the gravel driveway:

imbibing the silence,
you stare at spruce needles:

there's no sound of a leaf blower,
no signs of a black bear;

a few weeks ago, a buck scraped his rack
against an aspen trunk;
a carpenter scribed a plank along a curved stone wall.

You only spot the rabbit's ears and tail:

when it moves, you locate it against speckled gravel,
but when it stops, it blends in again;

the world of being is like this gravel:

you think you own a car, a house,
this blue-zigzagged shirt, but you just borrow these things.

Yesterday, you constructed an aqueduct of dreams
and stood at Gibraltar,
but you possess nothing.

Snow melts into a pool of clear water;
and, in this stillness,

starlight behind daylight wherever you gaze. [13]

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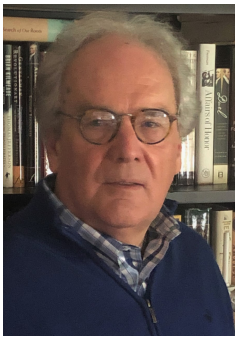
Tune in to my podcast, ***The American Tapestry Project*** on WQLN NPR 91.3FM public radio where I explore the post-1968 shattering of the American story by asking "What is the 'story of America'? Is there such a thing? Is there only one story, or are there many stories? If there are many stories, how are they woven, can they be woven, together to tell ***the*** story of America?"
Past programs can be found on WQLN's website here, and on NPR One here.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

End Notes

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13. Sze, Arthur. *"First Snow,"* in **Sightlines.** (Port Townshend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2019), p. 33.

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Caring for Erie's Economy: Childcare is Economic Development written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Court Gould, MPA**

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