JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #112

August 2022

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Summer Poems:
'Ah, summer, the season when soft is the sun'

– William Langland
from ***Piers Plowman***

If I counted correctly, the just completed "Seeds of Our Discontents" series swallowed 10 ***Book Notes*** (including one on patriotic poetry). *"The 60s"* have begun to weary me (and, I am afraid, probably you, too).

So, as I write this on August 3, the temperature in Erie swelters around 92 degrees; it is indeed, as Nat King Cole once sang, "the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer." More accurately, with the temperature in the 90s, it's the "dog days of summer." According to the ***Old Farmer's Almanac***, the "Dog Days" are the 40 days beginning July 3 and ending August 11. [1] They mark summer's hottest days.

(***Aside:*** The ***Old Farmer's Almanac*** also validates an admittedly pedantic pet peeve of mine. I am not sure when the practice began, but calling June 21 the first day of summer, September 21 the first day of autumn, etc., is incorrect. The solstices and equinoxes mark not the beginning but the height of the season. As in the running of the sap that gives us maple syrup in the spring, the seasons actually begin six weeks or so before the solstice or equinox and end six weeks or so later with the onset of the next season. OK, an admittedly pedantic quibble, but still, it

is irksome. Shakespeare knew what he was doing when he titled his play that unfolds on the summer solstice ***A Midsummer Night's Dream***.)

Regardless of all of that, did you ever wonder where the expression "dog days of summer" originated? According to Becky Little in the ***National Geographic***, the phrase had nothing to do with either dogs or Nat King Cole's "lazy, hazy, crazy days." As any astrologer reading this knows, "the dog days refer to Sirius, the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major, which means "big dog" in Latin and is said to represent one of Orion's hunting dogs." [2] It is the period when Sirius appears "to rise alongside the sun, in late July in the Northern Hemisphere." [3] The ancient Greeks and Romans thought the two stars' joint heat made these the year's hottest days "bringing fever or even catastrophe." [4] Eventually, across the millennia the year's hottest days gave rise to different legends, including the notion that the heat drove dogs crazy. Still, it's hard with the temperature at 92 and the Heat Index at 106 to disagree with the ***Old Farmer's Almanac's*** admonition in 1817 that the "Dog Days are approaching; you must, therefore, make both hay and haste while the Sun shines, for when old Sirius takes command of the weather, he is such an unsteady, crazy dog, there is no dependence upon him." [5]

What have the poets said about "the dog days of summer," those days Meena Alexander says when "muslin curls on its own heat/And crickets cry in the black walnut tree"? [6]

On just about any list of good, better, and greatest summer poems, Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18" appears and usually very near the top. Its first line may be the English language's most famous evocation of summer.

<u>Sonnet 18</u>

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wand'rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to Time thou grow'st.
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. [7]

** Note: ow'st = owns and death's shade = the afterlife*

Frequent readers of these ***Book Notes*** know that I believe explication can kill a poem; you should simply read it – maybe multiple times – and it will come clear. Poetry is the art of many things, but, perhaps betraying my preference for the lyric, its great strength lies in concentrating language, in saying in as few words as possible as much as possible. In this, one of the most famous of his works, Shakespeare demonstrates what Helen Vendler says is "his capacity to confer greater and greater mental scope on any whim of the imagination, enacting that

widening gradually so that the experience of reading a poem becomes the experience of pushing back the horizons of thought." [8]

Beginning with a seemingly banal line comparing his beloved to a summer's day, Shakespeare expands that simple observation into a meditation upon beauty's blossoming then fading, life's blossoming then fading, and art's ability to redeem both beauty and death by transcending both and giving to each a piece of immortality. And he does it in 14 lines and 116 words, eight of which are among the most famous in the language.

In his "For Once, Then Something," Robert Frost does something similar as he recounts the experience of looking into a well and thinking he glimpsed a hint of – a hint of what? Life's meaning, an intimation of immortality – something, nothing, but then it was gone leaving that sweet frustration of having almost seen the real behind the veil.

For Once, Then Something

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. [9]

Others less ethereal, not seeking metaphysical insight, sing of summer's simpler pleasures, like Paul Laurence Dunbar:

from In Summer

Oh, summer has clothed the earth
In a cloak from the loom of the sun!
And a mantle, too, of the skies' soft blue,
And a belt where the rivers run.

And now for the kiss of the wind,
And the touch of the air's soft hands,
With the rest from strife and the heat of life,
With the freedom of lakes and lands. [10]

Or Emma Lazarus, who wrote "The New Colossus" adorning the Statue of Liberty, but who in this poem simply sings of summer on Long Island.

from Long Island Sound

I see it as it looked one afternoon

In August ...
... the sparkle far and wide,
Laughter of unseen children, cheerful chirp
Of crickets, and low lisp of rippling tide,
Light summer clouds fantastical as sleep
Changing unnoted while I gazed thereon.
All these fair sounds and sights I made my own. [11]

Or Carl Sandburg in his folksy, thoroughly middle-American, midwestern manner evoking memories of a backyard summer and glimpses of America's protean story as folk of different backgrounds come together to experience America.

Back Yard

Shine on, O moon of summer.
Shine to the leaves of grass, catalpa and oak,
All silver under your rain to-night.

An Italian boy is sending songs to you to-night from an accordion.
A Polish boy is out with his best girl; they marry next month;
to-night they are throwing you kisses.

An old man next door is dreaming over a sheen that sits in a
cherry tree in his back yard.

The clocks say I must go – I stay here sitting on the back porch drinking
white thoughts you rain down.

Shine on, O moon,
Shake out more and more silver changes. [12]

Last week I was in a store and saw a small fan one plugs into one's phone. (When did "phones," which are not really phones at all but tiny, powerful computers linking us to everything, become standard equipment for any 21st century person from Kalamazoo to Kilimanjaro?) The phone-fan, of course, is a 21st century person's portable breeze, which made me think of H.D.'s (Hilda Doolittle) "Heat," in which she pleads for relief from heat like that which recently seared Erie.

Heat

O wind, rend open the heat,
cut apart the heat,
rend it to tatters.

Fruit cannot drop
through this thick air—
fruit cannot fall into heat
that presses up and blunts
the points of pears
and rounds the grapes.

Cut the heat—
plough through it,
turning it on either side
of your path. [13]

Summer is love's season; Shakespeare started it for us, but sometimes we miss the moment and love slips away never to begin. Aimee Nezhukumatathil, a poet I am just discovering and who apparently spent some time in nearby Fredonia, New York, speaks of that experience in:

from The Woman Who Turned Down a Date with a Cherry Farmer
Fredonia, New York

Of course I regret it. I mean there I was under umbrellas of fruit
so red they *had* to be borne of Summer, and no other season.
Flip-flops and fishhooks …
I was dusty, my ponytail
all askew and the tips of my fingers ran, of course, *red*

from the fruitwounds of cherries I plunked into my bucket
and still – he must have seen some small bit of loveliness
in walking his orchard with me …

His jeans were worn and twisty
around the tops of his boot; his hands thick but careful,
nimble enough to pull fruit from his trees without tearing
the thin skin; the cherry dust and fingerprints on his eyeglasses.

I just know when he stuffed his hands in his pockets, said
Okay. Couldn't hurt to try? and shuffled back to his roadside stand
to arrange his jelly jars and stacks of buckets, I had made
a terrible mistake. I just know my summer would've been
full of pies, tartlets, turnovers – so much jubilee. [14]

As we discovered in ***Book Notes*** #26: "Baseball and Poetry," which can be found here, baseball is *the* summer game. It's probably generational, but with all other sports inching into the summer season – come on, really, ice hockey in July? – strikes me as somehow heretical. William Carlos Williams gets at the crowds double-edged fickleness – one minute sunk in lassitude, the next aflame with excitement; one minute all about loving the home team, the next pitiless in booing the error; the crowd is us and we are the crowd.

from The Crowd at the Ball Game

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them -

all the exciting detail
of the chase

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius -

all to no end save beauty
the eternal -

So in detail they, the crowd,

are beautiful

for this
to be warned against

saluted and defied
It is alive, venomous

it smiles grimly
its words cut …

This is
the power of their faces

It is summer, it is the solstice
the crowd is

cheering, the crowd is laughing
in detail

permanently, seriously
without thought [15]

Summer evokes memories of childhood before electronics swallowed time. After dinner games of "hide and seek" or in my hometown of Canton, Ohio a version of "hide and seek" we called "kick the can," in which being tagged if you could beat the tagger back to home base and kick the can first, you were still free to go hide again. More evocative of the soft quiet of summer evenings was catching fireflies, putting them in Mason jars and placing the jars on the back porch. I suspect DDT or some other pesticide is the villain, but one does not see fireflies much anymore – a genuine loss driven home to me recently driving along the lake one evening when suddenly there were fireflies in the air. Sadly, only a few and I have not seen any since. This shred of a memory made me think of two poems. First, Robert Frost's:

Fireflies in the Garden

Here come real stars to fill the upper skies,
And here on earth come emulating flies,
That though they never equal stars in size,
(And they were never really stars at heart)
Achieve at times a very star-like start.
Only, of course, they can't sustain the part. [16]

Better, and this is not to disparage Frost, but to compliment Norman Dubie, who I think one of my generation's finest poets, Dubie's "New England Compline" exquisitely captures the stillness and beauty of that moment just after dusk as day ends. (Compline refers to the ninth and final prayer in the canonical hours, which are prayers prayed at fixed hours of the day. A compline is a prayer prayed at day's end. It is sometimes called a Night Prayer).

New England, Compline

A dark, thick branch in the last light is like
The hand of your grandmother

Dropping linen napkins on the shrubs to dry
Hopelessly in the few hours before night.
Across the garden
In the back a girl strikes a piano key just once
And then there is the sound of crickets. The evening

Itself seems slow with the oldest feelings:
A boy walks up the hill
With a glass jar; inside he has, perhaps, a snake,
A firefly or minnows. Three houses away
A man standing on his roof passes a short ladder
Down to his wife.

The stone nude beside the garden is bathing
In deep shade while inside the mouth
Of the nude in a copper dish a sparrow washes
Both its wings.

In the dark there's a lost sound, it is
A large jar breaking in the street, and up into the night
Almost heavy
Go fireflies striking their soft, yellow lights. [17]

Of course, summer ends. More poets than those up to the task have compared summer's fading to life's fading. The best line ever written evoking that metaphor is Tennyson's "after many a summer dies the swan" from his *Tithonus*, in which the aged Tithonus, yearning for death, engages in a dramatic monologue about life and life's passing with Eos, the goddess of the dawn. The poem begins with the famous quatrain:

from Tithonus

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,
The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,
Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,
And after many a summer dies the swan. [18]

With considerably less melodrama, Emily Dickinson in as "Imperceptibly as Grief" evokes the same emotion comparing summer's slow slide into autumn to a gathering grief just as life itself imperceptibly works a transcendence from the living to the light of its final exit.

As Imperceptibly as Grief

As imperceptibly as Grief
The Summer lapsed away –
Too imperceptible at last
To seem like Perfidy –
A Quietness distilled
As Twilight long begun,
Or Nature spending with herself
Sequestered Afternoon –
The Dusk drew earlier in –
The Morning foreign shone –

A courteous, yet harrowing Grace,
As Guest, that would be gone –
And thus, without a Wing
Or service of a Keel
Our Summer made her light escape
Into the Beautiful. [19]

Let's conclude this survey of summer poems with two about discovering one's identity amidst the heat of summer chores. First, Jack Gilbert's recounting of summer at his grandfather's and Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day."

Growing up in the 1930s and 1940s in Pittsburgh with its hot city streets, clanging mills, and smoky, steamy days, Gilbert discovers while fetching water for his grandfather that whatever he is, he is not a country boy. Which is actually a bit ironic, for Gilbert, friend of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Ferlinghetti, rejected being a "beat(nik)," rejected being a "hipster," and when fame and awards came calling famously decamped for the Greek Isles, where he lived an impoverished life amid rural isolation honing his art.

Summer at Blue Creek, North Carolina

There was no water at my grandfather's
when I was a kid and would go for it
with two zinc buckets. Down the path,
past the cow by the foundation where
the fine people's house was before
they arranged to have it burned down.
To the neighbor's cool well. Would
come back with pails too heavy,
so my mouth pulled out of shape.
I see myself, but from the outside.
I keep trying to feel who I was,
and cannot. Hear clearly the sound
the bucket made hitting the sides
of the stone well going down,
but never the sound of me. [20]

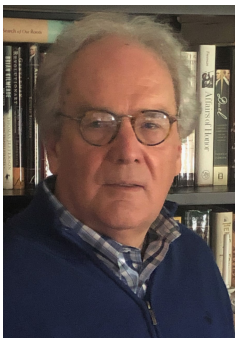
The last line of Mary Oliver's "The Summer Day" is the famous line; it has made many a reader uncomfortable as this "truest" and most authentic of poets asks if you have been or plan to be true to yourself. I think, however, the important line is two lines earlier, in which, after sketching how she's lived her life, Oliver asks both rhetorically and of the reader, "Tell me, what else should I have done?" It's almost certainly apocryphal, it sounds too western, but the Buddha allegedly said one should live one's life ethically and die with no regrets. The key to living that life is how one answers Oliver's "Tell me, what else should I have done?"

The Summer Day

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean –
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life? [21]

What's your favorite summer poem? Let me know at roth@jeserie.org.



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

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End Notes

1. *"The Dog Days of Summer"* at **Old Farmer's Almanac** available here accessed August 3, 2022.
2. Little, Becky, "*Here's why we call this time of year the 'dog days' of summer"* in the **National Geographic** (July 16, 2021) available here accessed August 3, 2022.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. *"The Dog Days of Summer"* cited above.
6. Alexander, Meena. *"Dog Days of Summer"* at the **Poetry Foundation** available here accessed August 3, 2022.
7. Shakespeare, William. *"Sonnet 18"* in Helen Vendler, ***The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets.*** (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 119.
8. Ibid., p. 120.
9. Frost, Robert. *"For Once, Then Something"* at **Poets.org** available here accessed August 3, 2022.
10. Dunbar, Paul Laurence, *"In Summer"* at **Poets.org** available here accessed August 3, 2022.
11. Lazarus, Emma. *"Long Island Sound"* at **Poets.org** available here accessed August 4, 2022.
12. Sandburg, Carl. *"Back Yard"* at **Poets.org** available here accessed August 4, 2022.
13. H.D. *"Heat"* at **Poetry Society of America** available here accessed August 4, 2022.
14. Nezhukumatathil, Aimee. *"The Woman Who Turned Down a Date with a Cherry Farmer"* at **The Poetry Foundation** available here accessed August 4, 2022.
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16. Frost, Robert. *"Fireflies in the Garden"* at **The Poetry Foundation** available here accessed August 4, 2022.
17. Dubie, Norman. *"New England, Compline"* in **Selected and New Poems**. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), p. 4.
18. Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *"Tithonus"* in **The Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry, and Drama.** (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1954), p. 86.
19. Dickinson, Emily. *"As Imperceptibly as Grief"* in **Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems,** Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1961), p. 296.
20. Gilbert, Jack. *"Summer at Blue Creek, North Carolina"* in **Collected Poems**. (New York: Alfred A.

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