

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## *Book Notes*

April 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
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### *Readers' Favorite Poems: Part One*



[1]

What's your favorite poem?

On February 25 in *Book Notes* #49, which can be found [here](#), I asked readers to share with me their favorite poem or poems. Many of you did, for which I thank you.

In these “Notes,” to preserve reader privacy, I will only refer to respondents by their first name. Responses ranged from the well-known but often neglected to cutting-edge contemporary work.

Among the well-known but now sometimes neglected, Sheila suggested Joyce Kilmer’s “Trees.” It is or was a staple of middle school and high school literature classes. Its opening couplet has been satirized numerous times, but the poem’s use of rhyme and easy meter introduced generations of students to poetry’s pleasures. In its gentle and unpretentious way, it also says something quite profound.

Without ever using what became in the late 20th century a verbal meme – “Be

Here Now” – Kilmer, in his self-deprecating fashion, draws our attention to the need to be *present-to-the-present*, to see the trees for the forest. That he died young at 31 from a sniper’s bullet in World War I adds poignancy to his reminding us to *be here now* for now is all we have.

from Trees

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest  
Against the sweet earth's flowing breast;

... A tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
Who intimately lives with rain. [2]

Although no longer as “cutting edge” as she once was, her success having not tamed her but moved the edge-that-cuts further along perception’s spectrum to where poets like Natalie Diaz [3] now work, Ben’s suggestion of Sharon Olds’ *“Rite of Passage”* works a terrain far edgier, far more cutting than Kilmer. I have been reading Sharon Olds since 1985 when I happened upon a copy of her first book of poetry, *Satan Says*, in a small bookshop that no longer exists on Chicago’s Michigan Avenue. It was erased in the avenue’s transformation into an outdoor mega-mall.

In an earlier *Book Notes* titled *“It Happens”* (July 30, 2020), available [here](#), we noted Olds’ reflections on 1968’s Columbia University student uprising in her *“May, 1968.”* Olds, as the Poetry Foundation writes, “is one of contemporary poetry’s leading voices.” [4] One of my favorite poets, she is both praised and vilified for her candor. As a rule, I abhor confessional poets. I have never been able to read anything by Anne Sexton, for example, to conclusion. Unlike Sexton, Olds leads you deep into her personal life, but in doing so does not make the mistake of thinking herself precious. Unflinching, she reports what she sees. In doing so, she makes a lot of people uncomfortable as she ruminates about what they would rather remain unnoted.

In *“Rite of Passage,”* the narrator, Olds, observes her son and his friends’ interaction at her son’s birthday party: “short men, men in first grade/with smooth jaws and chins.” The party is a rite of passage – “a ceremony or event marking an important stage in someone’s life, especially birth, puberty, marriage and death.” [5] A rite of passage frequently involves a test or experience one must pass or endure on the road to adulthood. In an intense pastiche of observations, Olds notes the boys testing one another, jockeying for position in the group as they sort out who will be the alpha male, hints of violence a constant undercurrent. In its miniaturization – young boys, first grade birthday party – it mimics almost perfectly male bonding’s double-edged nature.

from Rite of Passage

As the guests arrive at our son’s party  
they gather in the living room—

short men, men in first grade  
with smooth jaws and chins.  
Hands in pockets, they stand around  
jostling, jockeying for place, small fights  
breaking out and calming ...  
They eye each other, seeing themselves  
tiny in the other's pupils. They clear their  
throats a lot, a room of small bankers,  
they fold their arms and frown. *I could beat you  
up, a seven says to a six. ...* [6]

Part of the pleasure writing a "Note" like this is being reminded of old favorites and introduced to new pleasures. In the former category is Bob's suggestion of Mary Oliver's "Why I Wake Early." Although very different than Sharon Olds, Mary Oliver is also one of my favorites. Along with Jack Gilbert, she was the focus of *Book Notes* #3, which can be found [here](#). Neither, however, in that "Note" nor several others mentioning Oliver did we experience:

### Why I Wake Early

Hello, sun in my face.  
Hello, you who make the morning  
and spread it over the fields  
and into the faces of the tulips  
and the nodding morning glories,  
and into the windows of, even, the  
miserable and crotchety—

best preacher that ever was,  
dear star, that just happens  
to be where you are in the universe  
to keep us from ever-darkness,  
to ease us with warm touching,  
to hold us in the great hands of light—  
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day  
in happiness, in kindness. [7]

In a very different way, Patrick's recommendation of Tennyson's "Ulysses" also reminded me of the enjoyment old favorites elicit. As I am frequently reminded during my other Jefferson Society presentations, I am not particularly good at retirement. Which is fine, because I enjoy doing what I am doing and living out in my own way the advice of Bishop Richard Cumberland, a 17th century English philosopher, divine, and translator who allegedly first uttered, "It is better to wear out than to rust out." [8]

Tennyson said it better.

"Ulysses" is his coda to Homer's *The Odyssey*. After twenty years roaming the sea while returning from the Trojan War, the aged Ulysses *nee* Odysseus has finally returned to Ithaca, saved Penelope from the suitors, installed Telemachus, his son, as king and, living a life of ease utterly alien to his active temperament, grown bored and restless. He begins to itch for new adventures. It is both

humanity's blessing and curse – the endless need to know what is over the horizon, the need to know where the stream winding down the hillside leads, the need to know and to do. Rather than rust out, Ulysses decides to end his days finding out what lies beyond the horizon where the sun sets. He decides to seek a newer world, for it is better to sail over the world's edge to one's doom than to rust away yielding to time's slow decay.

from Ulysses

It little profits that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.  
I cannot rest from travel: I will drink  
Life to the lees:

... Much have I seen and known; cities of men  
And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;  
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.

... How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!  
As tho' to breathe were life!

... There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:  
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,  
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—

... you and I are old;  
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;  
Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,

... Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off. ... for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

... and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. [9]

Among the new discoveries to which readers introduced me were two suggestions by Eileen. I had somehow managed not to read anything by either, but Kay Ryan and Jim Moore merit further attention. Born in 1943, Moore lived a somewhat typical proto-Boomer writing life attending college and graduate school then teaching in a small college. All that changed when two young students of his

dropped out of school, were immediately drafted and killed in Vietnam. Moore felt ethically obligated to give up his teaching deferment, then refused his draft induction. Sent to prison, he discovered that when he told other prisoners he was a poet, he was not ridiculed but respected. He began a poetry workshop and discovered “poetry’s power to help sustain people’s lives in extreme situations.” Later, in 1975, he was present at LaGuardia Airport when a bomb went off in the luggage area killing 12 people. Surviving, he was struck by how “arbitrary fate can be.” [10] That recognition made Moore keenly attuned to being present-to-the-present. From my vantage point, a key sensibility, to use a fancy term, is to be phenomenologically literate – to be aware of and attuned to the phenomena, the bits and pieces of everyday life that in some strange alchemy add up to life itself. It is the stuff most of us miss because we are too busy *doing* and not *attending* – not giving sufficient attention to what is right in front of us. Moore “attends” and in attending *sees*, as in Eileen’s suggestion of “Love In the Ruins”:

### Love In the Ruins

1

I remember my mother toward the end,  
folding the tablecloth after dinner  
so carefully,  
as if it were the flag  
of a country that no longer existed,  
but once had ruled the world.

2

7 A.M. and the barefoot man  
leaves his lover's house  
to go back to his basement room  
across the alley. I nod hello,  
continuing to pick  
the first small daffodils  
which just yesterday began to bloom.

3

Helicopter flies overhead  
reminding me of that old war  
where one friend lost his life,  
one his mind,  
and one came back happy  
to be missing only an unnecessary finger.

4

I vow to write five poems today,  
look down and see a crow  
rising into thick snow on 5th Avenue  
as if pulled by invisible strings,  
and already  
there is only one to go.

5

Survived  
another winter: my black stocking cap,  
my mismatched gloves,

my suspicious, chilly heart. [11]

A former American poet laureate, like many contemporary American poets, Kay Ryan has been an academic. Her poetry, however, is hardly academic. It is characterized by an intense interest in the rift between humans and the natural world and by a concise and intense compression in which little is said but much is evoked. Her *"The Niagara River"* comes from her collection *The Niagara River*, which consists of sixty short poems – some only a sentence or two in length – exploring that rupture between humans and the natural world from which they emerged.

### The Niagara River

As though  
the river were  
a floor, we position  
our table and chairs  
upon it, eat, and  
have conversation.  
As it moves along,  
we notice – as  
calmly as though  
dining room paintings  
were being replaced –  
the changing scenes  
along the shore. We  
do know, we do  
know this is the  
Niagara River, but  
it is hard to remember  
what that means. [12]

Among a number of interesting suggestions, a former colleague in Cleveland, Roz, recommended Stephen Dunn's *"Ambush at Five O'Clock."* Like any number of aspiring writers, Dunn began his career in advertising. In the interest of sanity, his, he bailed, went to Spain, wrote a lousy novel, and turned to poetry. And, like many a poet, became a college professor to pay the bills.

If humans live in tribes, then the tribe Dunn explores is solidly and unapologetically rooted in the American middle class. His poetry reconnoiters that territory's culture and values, its fears and joys as regular folks, folks just like you and me, try to figure out how to live with one another. And, of course, men and women navigate *coupledness*, or, perhaps, not. In "Beautiful Women," many have found Dunn's wry observation spot on.

### *from* Beautiful Women

More things come to them,  
and they have more to hide.  
All around them: mirrors, eyes.  
In any case  
they are different from other women  
and like great athletes have trouble  
making friends, and trusting a world

quick to praise. [13]

In *“Ambush at Five O’Clock,”* Dunn considers several interlocking themes: neighbors who kind of know one another but not really, differing levels of sensitivity between women and men, men’s penchant for the boorish question when they want to seem profound, or men being glib masking their awkwardness when in their mouth they have inserted their foot and, just generally, the questions do we really know our neighbors, do we really know ourselves. It should be quickly pointed, regarding men and women’s differing levels of sensitivity, that it is Dunn, the male, who sees it all.

*from Ambush at Five O’Clock*

We were by the hedge that separates our properties  
when I asked our neighbors about their souls.  
I said it with a smile, the way one asks such a thing.  
They were somewhat like us, I thought, more  
than middle-aged, less dull than most.  
Yet they seemed to have no interest  
in disputation, our favorite game,  
or any of the great national pastimes  
like gossip and stories of misfortunes  
about people they disliked.

In spite of these differences, kindred  
was a word we often felt and used.

... After I asked about their souls  
they laughed and stumbled toward an answer,  
then gave up, turned the question back  
to me. And because I felt mine always was  
in jeopardy I said it went to the movies  
and hasn’t been seen since. I said gobbledy  
and I said gook. I found myself needing  
to fool around, avoid, stay away from myself.

But my wife said her soul suffered from neglect,  
that she herself was often neglectful  
of important things, but so was I.  
Then she started to cry. What’s the matter? I asked.  
What brought this on? She did not answer.  
I felt ambushed, publicly insensitive  
about something, whatever it was.  
It was a dusky five o’clock, that time  
in between one thing and another.  
Our neighbors retreated to their home,  
but the woman returned  
and without a word put her arms  
around my wife as if a woman weeping  
indicated something already understood  
among women, that need not be voiced.  
They held each other, rocked back and forth,

and I thought Jesus Christ, am I guilty again

of one of those small errors  
I've repeated until it became large?  
What about me? I thought. What about  
the sadness of being stupid?  
Why doesn't her husband return  
with maybe a beer and a knowing nod? [14]

Roz also suggested several poems by Billy Collins and Stanley Kunitz. Billy Collins, who if he is not the only one is certainly one of the few poets who manages to sell books in substantial numbers, garnered multiple suggestions by a number of people – Ben, Chuck, Becky and others. I have never caught the Billy Collins bug. I find him facile, but maybe I am wrong. Next week in *Book Notes* we'll investigate the world of Billy Collins seeking whatever it is I've missed that impresses people whose judgment I respect.

In addition to a number of other reader suggestions, we'll also look into Stanley Kunitz's "The Layers" and "Touch Me," the latter Kunitz offering submitted by Julie.

For now, let us close with one Paul brought to my attention – Langston Hughes' "I Dream a World." Hughes graduated from high school in Cleveland, so he knows Lake Erie, but he is most famous as a member of what came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance during the 1920s along with Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and others. He is frequently cited as one of the greatest African-American poets, which is wrong.

He is one of the greatest American poets.

We will consider all of his work in a future *Book Notes*, but for now his "*I Dream a World*" speaks to the ongoing need to weave all Americans into the tapestry of America's "*We the People*":

### I Dream a World

I dream a world where [each person]  
No other [person] 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 [person] is free,  
Where wretchedness will hang its head  
And joy, like a pearl,  
Attends the needs of all [humanity] –  
Of such I dream, my world! [15]

Thank you for your suggestions! Keep them coming!

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.  
*Scholar-in-Residence*





#### End Notes

1. *Poetry Wordle*: Terry Elliott at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/tellio/4968880402/in/photostream/>  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/tellio/4967681955>
2. Kilmer, Joyce. "Trees," at **Poets.org** available at <https://poets.org/poem/trees> accessed March 28, 2021.
3. See Perez, Emily, "Postcolonial Love Poem by Natalie Diaz – intimate, electric, defiant," in **The Guardian** available at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/18/postcolonial-love-poem-by-natalie-diaz-review-intimate-electric-and-defiant> accessed March 28, 2021.
4. "Sharon Olds," **The Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/sharon-olds#tab-poems> accessed March 28, 2021.
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6. Olds, Sharon. "Rite of Passage," **The Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47055/rite-of-passage> accessed March 28, 2021.
7. Oliver, Mary. "Why I Wake Early," in **Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver**. (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 171.
8. Cumberland, Bishop Richard, "It is better ..." in **The Times Book of Quotations**, Intro. Philip Howard. (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), p. 754.
9. Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. "Ulysses" in **The Victorian Age: Prose, Poetry, and Drama**. Second Ed. John Wilson Bowyer and John Lee Brooks, Eds. (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, Inc., 1954), pp. 85-86.
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11. "Love In the Ruins" at **jimmoorepoet.com** available at <https://jimmoorepoet.com/biography/> accessed March 28, 2021.
12. Ryan, Kay. "The Niagara River" at **PoemHunter.com** available at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-obsolotion-of-a-language/#content> accessed March 28, 2021.
13. Dunn, Stephen. "Beautiful Women," in **Stephen Dunn: New and Selected Poems 1974-1994**. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), pp. 26-27.
14. Dunn, Stephen. "Ambush at Five O'Clock" in **The New Yorker** available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/02/03/ambush-at-five-oclock> accessed March 28, 2021.
15. Hughes, Langston. "I Dream a World" at **Worship Words** available at <https://worshipwords.co.uk/i-dream-a-world-langston-hughes-usa/> accessed March 28, 2021.

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[Retrospective: A Year of Book Notes](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[The Jewel Tea Man Bay Rats Had Their Own Amazon Prime, Starbucks](#)  
written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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