

POETRY AS DEEP CONVERSATION
Sample Poems for Workshop by Eleanor Berry

Wallace Stevens

Nuances of a Theme by Williams

*It's a strange courage
you give me, ancient star:*

*Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!*

I

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II

Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses
you in its own light.
Be not chimera of morning,
Half-man, half-star.
Be not an intelligence,
Like a widow's bird
Or an old horse.

William Carlos Williams

El Hombre

It's a strange courage
you give me ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise
toward which you lend no part!

John Keats

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Starker Stern, der nicht den Beistand braucht

Starker Stern, der nicht den Beistand braucht,
Den die Nacht den andern mag gewähren,
Die erst dunkeln muß, daß sie sich klären.
Stern, der schon vollendet, untertaucht,

Wenn Gestirne ihren Gang beginnen
Durch die langsam aufgetane Nacht.
Großer Stern der Liebespriesterinnen,
Der, von eignem Gefühl entfacht,

Bis zuletzt verklärt und nie verkohlend,
Niedersinkt, wohin die Sonne sank:
Tausendfachen Aufgang überholend
Mit dem reinen Untergang.

Strongest star that does not need the help
that the night would grant to other stars,
for whom it must first darken, so they may brighten.
Star, already perfect, sink underground,

when the constellations begin their transits
through the slowly-opening night.
Great star, of love's priestesses,
which feeling kindles from itself,

until at last transfigured, never charred,
it sinks down, where the sunlight sank:
surpassing the thousand-fold ascent
with its pure down-going.

Adrienne Rich

Orion

Far back when I went zig-zagging
through tamarack pastures
you were my genius, you
my cast-iron Viking, my helmed
lion-heart king in prison.
Years later now you're young

my fierce half-brother, staring
down from that simplified west
your breast open, your belt dragged down
by an old-fashioned thing, a sword
the last bravado you won't give over
though it weighs you sown as you stride

and the stars in it are dim
and maybe have stopped burning.
But you burn, and I know it;
as I throw back my head to take you in
an old transfusion happens again:
divine astronomy is nothing to it.

Indoors I bruise and blunder,
break faith, leave ill enough
alone, a dead child born in the dark.

Night cracks up over the chimney,
pieces of time, frozen geodes
come showering down in the grate.

A man reaches behind my eyes
and finds them empty
a woman's head turns away
from my head in the mirror
children are dying my death
and eating crumbs of my life.

Pity is not your forte.
Calmly you ache up there
pinned aloft in your crow's nest,
my speechless pirate!
You take it all for granted
and when I look you back

it's with a starlike eye
shooting its cold and egotistical spear
where it can so least damage.
Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon
out here in the cold with you
you with your back to the wall.

Gary Snyder

Endless Streams and Mountains

Ch'i Shan Wu Chin

Clearing the mind and sliding in
to that created space,
a web of waters steaming over rocks,
air misty but not raining,
seeing this land from a boat on a lake
or a broad slow river,
coasting by.

The path comes down along a lowland stream
slips behind boulders and leafy hardwoods,
reappears in a pine grove,

no farms around, just tidy cottages and shelters,
gateways, rest stops, roofed but unwall'd work space,
—a warm damp climate;

a trail of climbing stairsteps forks upstream.
Big ranges lurk behind these rugged little outcrops—
these spits of low ground rocky uplifts
layered pinnacles aslant,
flurries of brushy cliffs receding,
far back and high above, vague peaks.
A man hunched over, sitting on a log
another stands above him, lifts a staff,
a third, with a roll of mats or a lute, looks on;
a bit offshore two people in a boat.

The trail goes far inland,
somewhere back around a bay,
lost in distant foothill slopes
& back again
at a village on the beach, and someone's fishing.

Rider and walker cross a bridge
above a frothy braided torrent
that descends from a flurry of roofs like flowers
temples tucked between cliffs,
a side trail goes there;

a jumble of cliffs above,
ridge tops edged with bushes,
valley fog below a hazy canyon.

A man with a shoulder load leans into the grade.
Another horse and a hiker,
the trail goes up along cascading streambed
no bridge in sight—
comes back through chinquapin or
liquidambar; another group of travelers.
Trail's end at the edge of an inlet
below a heavy set of dark rock hills.
Two moored boats with basket roofing,
 a boatman in the bow looks
 lost in thought.

Hills beyond rivers, willows in a swamp,
a gentle valley reaching far inland.

The watching boat has floated off the page.

●

At the end of the painting the scroll continues on with seals and poems. It tells the a further tale:

“—Wang Wen-wei saw this at the mayor's house in Ho-tung town, year 1205. Wrote at the end of it,

‘The Fashioner of Things
 has no original intentions
Mountains and rivers
 are spirit, condensed.’

‘. . . Who has come up with
 these miraculous forests and springs?
Pale ink
 on fine white silk’

Later that month someone named Li Hui added,

‘. . . Most people can get along with the noise of dogs and chickens;
Everybody cheerful in these peaceful times.
But I—why are my tastes so odd?
I love the company of streams and boulders.’

T'ien Hsieh of Wei-lo, no date, next wrote,

‘ . . . The water holds up the mountains,
The mountains go down in the water . . . ’

In 1332 Chih-shun adds,

‘ . . . This is truly a painting worth careful keeping.
And it has poem-colophons from the Sung and the
Chin dynasties. That it survived dangers of fire and
war makes it even rarer.’

In the mid-seventeenth century one Wang To had a look at it:

‘My brother's relative by marriage, Wên-sun, is learned and
has good taste. He writes good prose and poetry. My
brother brought over this painting of his to show me . . . ’

The great Ch'ing dynasty collector Liang Ch'ing-piao owned it,
but didn't write on it or cover it with seals. From him it went into
the Imperial collection down to the early twentieth century. Chang
Ta-ch'ien sold it in 1949. Now it's at the Cleveland Art Museum,
which sits on a rise that looks out toward the waters of Lake Erie.

●

Step back and gaze again at the land:
it rises and subsides—

ravines and cliffs like waves of blowing leaves—
stamp the foot, walk with it, clap! turn,
the creeks come in, ah!
strained through boulders,
mountains walking on the water,
water ripples every hill.

—I walk out of the museum—low gray clouds over the lake—
chill March breeze.

●

Old ghost ranges, sunken rivers, come again
stand by the wall and tell their tale,
walk the path, sit the rains,

grind the ink, wet the brushes, unroll the
broad white space:

lead out and tip
the moist black line.

*Walking on walking,
under foot earth turns.*

Streams and mountains never stay the same.

Note: According to Snyder, “A hand scroll by this name [“Endless Streams and Mountains”] showed up in Shansi province, central China, in the thirteenth century. Even then the painter was unknown, ‘a person of the Sung Dynasty,’” See <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1953.126>

Paul Merchant

Mist

When I could handle chopsticks, my parents
sold me to a rich man, a maker of mirrors
at the shogun’s court. For years I polished
surfaces reflecting the ten thousand things.
On their backs I engraved erotic couplings.

We begin and end (let no-one tell you
otherwise) in mist. I remember sunlight
striking a steep ridge. Below me the river’s
pewter gleam, four boats drifting, aimless.
The fish still deep in the chilled water.

There was an inlet, serving a tiny village
of thatched houses. An impenetrable mist
six decades deep rolls in. Was the mountain
there that day? I recall only the spring’s
pale sun opening the scarlet maple buds.

They climbed past me on the hill’s flank,
four men and a girl, with rakes and mattocks,
baskets slung for mushrooms. On her hip

she carried a pouch. Her thick hair bunched into a mare's tail, the men hunched, balding.

I remember now her over-kimono scattered with plum blossoms tucked up at her waist, the dark blue sash. She strode up the slope and was gone. Her plump shapely calves and bare feet. The others seemed smaller.

The ten thousand things narrow to three:
Paper, ink, the brush's secret whisper
dragging its line. As my master promised
I have become an adept in surfaces,
a craft adrift in this floating world.

Note: The poem is in the voice of Katsushika Hokusai. Reference is to a brush painting in his *100 Views of Mt. Fuji* (1834).



See <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/78803>

Slippage

Venus of Urbino, Olympia—each successive version slips
farther indoors from the mythic landscape where Giorgione's Venus sleeps.

In Hiratsuka's *Breakfast on the Bed*, the reclining female is not nude,
though she appears so from a distance. Up close, one sees she's wearing a slip.

From outside the frame, a maid comes bearing, not a bouquet, but a stack
of pancakes. This sharp-boned model won't eat all that. After coffee, she'll slip

into a sheath or pencil skirt, pick up her smartphone.

When, newlyweds, we rented our first flat in Toronto, I was still such a slip

of a girl that the next-door neighbor mistook me for a minor.

Christmases with my husband's family, he and I would slip

out of the noisy house, walk among the stones in the graveyard down the street.

In my mother-in-law's bird books, many pages are marked with slips

of paper, neatly penciled with notes on her sightings.

To stabilize the steep bank, we planted slips

of native shrubs—bare sticks that took root and grew.

Each spring they leaf out; each summer they bloom. Season slips

into season, year into year. We were the youngest and looked
younger than our ages. Decades have slipped

by, and now we're often surprised to find ourselves the oldest.

Over eons, continents drift, crustal plates slip

and grind against each other. Geologists measure their movements.

The lines of a poem are a seismograph of sorts, recording slips

of the tongue against the teeth and the roof of the mouth—not mere
sound and motion, but the pressure behind them of all that seeks to slip

through the cracks in the form. Artists sign their compositions—*Tiziano Vecelli*,
Edouard Manet, *Yuji Hiratsuka*—claiming them as their own even as they slip

from their hands, to be transformed in turn by later artists' visions
as movement succeeds movement, era slips

into era. Poets do likewise, as I, to bring to an end this twenty-first-century
American twist on an ancient Persian form, let slip

my name, Eleanor Berry

Giorgione (& Titian?), *Venere dormiente*
(*The Sleeping Venus*), 1510



Tiziano Vecelli (Titian), *Venere di Urbino*
(*Venus of Urbino*), ~1534



Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863



Yuji Hiratsuka, *Breakfast on the Bed*, ~2015

