

Lyric Poetry: Nature, Love, and Death

Seminar X – Wednesday, May 14, 2025

Selections from Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Richard Wilbur

Fern Hill

By Dylan Thomas

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep
 I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
 Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

The Morning, Space for Leda

By Dylan Thomas

The morning, space for Leda
To stir the water with a buoyant foot,
And interlude for violins
To catch her sailing down the stream—
The phrases on the wood aren't hers;
A fishing bird has notes of ivory
Alive within his craning throat—
Sees the moon still up,
Bright, well-held head,
And, for a pivot,
The shadows from the glassy sea
To wet the sky with tears,
And daub the unrisen sun with longing.
The swan makes strings of water in her wake ;
Between the moon and sun
There's time to pluck a tune upon the harp,
Moisten the mouth of sleep
To kiss awake
My hand with honey that had closed upon a flower.
Between the rising and the falling
Spring may be green—
Under her cloth of trees no sorrow,
Under her grassy dress no limbs—
And winter follow like an echo
The summer voice so warm from fruit
That clustered round her shoulders,
And hid her uncovered breast.
The morning, too, is time for love,

When Leda, on a toe of down,
Dances a measure with the swan
Who holds her clasped inside his strong,
white wings
And darkness, hand in hand with light,
Is blind with tears too frail to taste.

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

By Dylan Thomas

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.
The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.
The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.
And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Altarwise By Owl-Light By Dylan Thomas

Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman lay graveward with his furies;
Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrows scream.
Then, penny-eyed, that gentlemen of wounds,
Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg,
With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,
Scraped at my cradle in a walking word
That night of time under the Christward shelter:
I am the long world's gentlemen, he said,
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.

Death is all metaphors, shape in one history;
The child that sucketh long is shooting up,
The planet-ducted pelican of circles
Weans on an artery the genders strip;
Child of the short spark in a shapeless country
Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;
The horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon,
You by the cavern over the black stairs,
Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam,
And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars.
Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent,
Are but the roots of nettles and feathers
Over the groundwork's thrusting through a pavement
And hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers.

First there was the lamb on knocking knees
 And three dead seasons on a climbing grave
 That Adam's wether in the flock of horns,
 Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve,
 Horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes
 On thunderous pavements in the garden of time;
 Rip of the vaults, I took my marrow-ladle
 Out of the wrinkled undertaker's van,
 And, Rip Van Winkle from a timeless cradle,
 Dipped me breast-deep in the descending bone;
 The black ram, shuffling of the year, old winter,
 Alone alive among his mutton fold,
 We rung our weathering changes on the ladder,
 Said the antipodes, and twice spring chimed.

What is the metre of the dictionary?
 The size of genesis? the short spark's gender?
 Shade without shape? the shape of the Pharaohs echo?
 (My shape of age nagging the wounded whisper.)
 Which sixth of wind blew out the burning gentry?
 (Questions are hunchbacks to the poker marrow.)
 What of a bamboo man among your acres?
 Corset the boneyards for a crooked boy?
 Button your bodice on a hump of splinters,
 My camel's eyes will needle through the shroud.
 Loves reflection of the mushroom features,
 Still snapped by night in the bread-sided field,
 Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,
 Arc-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood.

And Death Shall Have No Dominion

By Dylan Thomas

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
Under the windings of the sea
They lying long shall not die windily;
Twisting on racks when sinews give way,
Strapped to a wheel, yet they shall not break;
Faith in their hands shall snap in two,
And the unicorn evils run them through;
Split all ends up they shan't crack;
And death shall have no dominion.

And death shall have no dominion.
No more may gulls cry at their ears
Or waves break loud on the seashores;
Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.

Poppies In July

By Sylvia Plath

Little poppies, little hell flames,
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns

And it exhausts me to watch you
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes I cannot touch.
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep! -
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,
Dulling and stilling.

But colorless. Colorless.

On The Decline Of Oracles

By Sylvia Plath

My father kept a vaulted conch
By two bronze bookends of ships in sail,
And as I listened its cold teeth seethed
With voices of that ambiguous sea
Old Böcklin missed, who held a shell
To hear the sea he could not hear.
What the seashell spoke to his inner ear
He knew, but no peasants know.

My father died, and when he died
He willed his books and shell away.
The books burned up, sea took the shell,
But I, I keep the voices he
Set in my ear, and in my eye
The sight of those blue, unseen waves
For which the ghost of Böcklin grieves.
The peasants feast and multiply.

Eclipsing the spitted ox I see
Neither brazen swan nor burning star,
Heraldry of a starker age,
But three men entering the yard,
And those men coming up the stair.
Profitless, their gossiping images
Invade the cloistral eye like pages
From a gross comic strip, and toward

The happening of this happening
The earth turns now. In half an hour
I shall go down the shabby stair and meet,
Coming up, those three. Worth
Less than present, past—this future.
Worthless such vision to eyes gone dull
That once descried Troy's towers fall,
Saw evil break out of the north.

Ode For Ted

By Sylvia Plath

From under the crunch of my man's boot
green oat-sprouts jut;
he names a lapwing, starts rabbits in a rout
legging it most nimble
to sprigged hedge of bramble,
stalks red fox, shrewd stoat.

Loam-humps, he says, moles shunt
up from delved worm-haunt;
blue fur, moles have; hefting chalk-hulled flint
he with rock splits open
knobbed quartz; flayed colors ripen
rich, brown, sudden in sunlight.

For his least look, scant acres yield:
each finger-furrowed field
heaves forth stalk, leaf, fruit-nubbed emerald;
bright grain sprung so rarely
he hauls to his will early;
at his hand's staunch hest, birds build.

Ringdoves roost well within his wood,
shirr songs to suit which mood
he saunters in; how but most glad
could be this adam's woman
when all earth his words do summon
leaps to laud such man's blood!

Black Rook In Rainy Weather

By Sylvia Plath

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain-
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can't honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Lean incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and
then —
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape);
sceptical
Yet politic, ignorant

Of whatever angel any choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a
rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur.
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance
Miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,

For that rare, random descent.

Digging

By Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch
and slap

Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Mid-Term Break By Seamus Heaney

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying—
He had always taken funerals in his stride—
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were 'sorry for my trouble'.
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanced and bandaged by the
nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four-foot box, a foot for every year.

Antaeus

By Seamus Heaney

When I lie on the ground
I rise flushed as a rose in the morning.
In flights I arrange a fall on the ring
To rub myself with sand

That is operative
As an elixir. I cannot be weaned
Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins.
Down here in my cave

Girdered with root and rock
I am cradled in the dark that wombed me
And nurtured in every artery
Like a small hillock.

Let each new hero come
Seeking the golden apples and Atlas.
He must wrestle with me before pass
Into that realm of fame

Among sky-born and royal:
He may well throw me and renew my birth
But let him not plan, lifting me off the earth,
My elevation, my fall.

Bogkand

for T. P. Flanagan

by Seamus Heaney

We have no prairies
To slice a big sun at evening—
Everywhere the eye concedes to
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops 'eye
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country
Is bog that keeps crusting
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton
Of the Great Irish Elk
Out of the peat, set it up,
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under
More than a hundred years
Was recovered salty and white.
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
Missing its last definition
By millions of years.
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
Of great firs, soft as pulp.
Our pioneers keep striking
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip
Seems camped on before.
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.
The wet centre is bottomless.

Tollund

By Seamus Heaney

That Sunday morning we had travelled far.
We stood a long time out in Tollund Moss:
The low ground, the swart water, the thick grass
Hallucinatory and familiar.

A path through Jutland fields. Light traffic sound.
Willow bushes; rushes; bog-fir grags
In a swept and gated farmyard; dormant quags.
And silage under warps in its silent mound.

It could have been a still out of the bright
"Townland of Peace", that poem of dream farms
Outside all contention. The scarecrow's arms
Stood open opposite the satellite

Dish in the paddock, where a standing stone
Had been resituated and landscaped:
With tourist signs in *futhark* runic script
In Danish and in English. Things had moved on.

It could have been Mullhollandstown or Scribe.
The byroads had their names on them in black
And white; it was user-friendly outback
Where we stood footloose, at home beyond the tribe.

More scouts than strangers, ghosts who'd walked abroad
Unfazed by light, to make a new beginning:
And make a go of it, alive and sinning,
Ourselves again, free-willed again, not bad.

The Pardon

by Richard Wilbur

My dog lay dead five days without a grave
In the thick of summer, hid in a clump of pine
And a jungle of grass and honeysuckle-vine.
I who had loved him while he kept alive

Went only close enough to where he was
To sniff the heavy honeysuckle-smell
Twined with another odor heavier still
And hear the flies' intolerable buzz.

Well, I was ten and very much afraid.
In my kind world the dead were out of range
And I could not forgive the sad or strange
In beast or man. My father took the spade

And buried him. Last night I saw the grass
Slowly divide (it was the same scene
But now it glowed a fierce and mortal green)
And saw the dog emerging. I confess

I felt afraid again, but still he came
In the carnal sun, clothed in a hymn of flies,
And death was breeding in his lively eyes.
I started in to cry and call his name,

Asking forgiveness of his tongueless head.
. . . I dreamt the past was never past redeeming:
But whether this was false or honest dreaming
I beg death's pardon now. And mourn the dead.

Advice to a Prophet

By Richard Wilbur

When you come, as you soon must, to the streets of our city,
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,
Not proclaiming our fall but begging us
In God's name to have self-pity,

Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range,
The long numbers that rocket the mind;
Our slow, unreckoning hearts will be left behind,
Unable to fear what is too strange.

Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race.
How should we dream of this place without us?—
The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us,
A stone look on the stone's face?

Speak of the world's own change. Though we cannot conceive
Of an undreamt thing, we know to our cost
How the dreamt cloud crumbles, the vines are blackened by frost,
How the view alters. We could believe,

If you told us so, that the white-tailed deer will slip
Into perfect shade, grown perfectly shy,
The lark avoid the reaches of our eye,
The jack-pine lose its knuckled grip

On the cold ledge, and every torrent burn
As Xanthus once, its gliding trout
Stunned in a twinkling. What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return,

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken?

Ask us, prophet, how we shall call

Our natures forth when that live tongue is all

Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean

Horse of our courage, in which beheld

The singing locust of the soul unshelled,

And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, ask us whether with the worldless rose

Our hearts shall fail us; come demanding

Whether there shall be lofty or long standing

When the bronze annals of the oak-tree close.

Merlin Enthralled

by Richard Wilbur

In a while they rose and went out aimlessly riding.
Leaving their drained cups on the table round.
Merlin, Merlin, their hearts cried, where are you hiding?
In all the world was no unnatural sound.

Mystery watched them riding glade by glade;
They saw it darkle from under leafy brows;
But leaves were all its voice, and squirrels made
An alien fracas in the ancient boughs.

Once by a lake-edge something made them stop.
Yet what they found was the thumping of a frog,
Bugs skating on the shut water-top,
Some hairlike algae bleaching on a log.

Gawen thought for a moment that he heard
A whitehorn breathe "Niniane." That Siren's daughter
Rose in a fort of dreams and spoke the word
"Sleep", her voice like dark diving water;

And Merlin slept, who had imagined her
Of water-sounds and the deep unsoundable swell
A creature to bewitch a sorcerer,
And lay there now within her towering spell.

Slowly the shapes of searching men and horses
Escaped him as he dreamt on that high bed:
History died; he gathered in its forces;
The mists of time condensed in the still head

Until his mind, as clear as mountain water,
Went raveling toward the deep transparent dream
Who bade him sleep. And then the Siren's daughter
Received him as the sea receives a stream.

Fate would be fated; dreams desire to sleep.
This the forsaken will not understand.
Arthur upon the road began to weep
And said to Gawen, "Remember when this hand

Once haled a sword from stone; now no less strong
It cannot dream of such a thing to do."
Their mail grew quainter as they clopped along.
The sky became a still and woven blue.

The Death of a Toad

by Richard Wilbur

A toad the power mower caught,
Chewed and clipped of a leg, with a hobbling hop has got
To the garden verge, and sanctuaried him
Under the cineraria leaves, in the shade
Of the ashen and heartshaped leaves, in a dim,
Low, and a final glade.

The rare original heartsblood goes,
Spends in the earthen hide, in the folds and wizenings, flows
In the gutters of the banked and staring eyes. He lies
As still as if he would return to stone,
And soundlessly attending, dies
Toward some deep monotone,

Toward misted and ebullient seas
And cooling shores, toward lost Amphibia's emperies.
Day dwindles, drowning and at length is gone
In the wide and antique eyes, which still appear
To watch, across the castrate lawn,
The haggard daylight steer.