

Common Thread 3



2018

COMMON THREADS
Volume 7 | 2018 Edition

Common Threads is a free annual publication and outreach program produced by Mass Poetry, with a goal to broaden the audience for poetry and support poets and poetry in Massachusetts by helping thousands of people across the Commonwealth come together in small, local groups to read and discuss poetry. Mass Poetry is a 501(c)3 organization.

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Cover Art:

"The Red Skiff," 48x48 mixed media on canvas

"The Red Skiff" is part of a series of singular boat paintings that evoke a myriad of emotions depending on the viewer's state of mind. Examples of these popular paintings and the artist's extensive body of work can be viewed at reginapiantedosi.com.

Regina Piantedosi is an internationally collected, award-winning progressive artist returning for her fifth season to "Regina Piantedosi Gallery" 77 Rocky Neck, Gloucester, MA in the oldest art colony in the U.S. Piantedosi winters in Delray Beach, FL where her work is displayed on Atlantic Avenue through the Delray Art League. She is known in Key West and at the Boston Design Center as well.

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Born to Be Lonely: Massachusetts Poets on Connection and Disconnection

Alan Feldman, Guest Editor

Herman Melville wrote *Moby-Dick* while living in Pittsfield; Anne Sexton lived in Weston; Etheridge Knight spent a number of years in the Worcester area (when I remember him visiting my classes at Framingham State); and Marie Howe was born in New York and was recently state poet laureate there, but, like so many poets, worked and studied in Massachusetts; at one time she was teaching at Tufts. Martín Espada, Jeffrey Harrison, and January O'Neil all live in Massachusetts, among us.

So many poets live or have lived in our state that “Massachusetts poet” might seem to describe half the poets in the universe. No challenge, then, to find poets for Common Threads, a program and anthology featuring seven to ten poems by Massachusetts poets to be read and discussed state-wide. To help me make this year’s selection, I formed a small committee of poets, librarians, and teachers to send suggestions. From these, and my own ideas, I put together about thirty poems that we met to discuss, trying to determine which ones our citizens would most want to talk about. Though I knew the poems were supposed to be connected by a theme, I didn’t want to start that way. I guess you can say a poem has a “theme” the way you can say a man or woman has a certain kind of personality, or favors this or that political party. But I didn’t want to collect them that way. I told the committee to pick the best poems they could think of (regardless of party affiliation!) and I was pretty confident—since they all had to pass through the filter of one particular editor—that a theme would emerge. In fact, if I couldn’t see it at first, they’d tell me what it was.

It seems that I’m interested in the tension between a desire for loneliness and a need for connection with others. “I am lonely, lonely / I was born to be lonely / I am best so” sings William Carlos Williams in “Danse Russe,” dancing naked in his attic-study while his wife and the baby are downstairs. Since I’m a grandfather now, I can tell you with some authority that we come out of the box pretty much as the people we’re going to be. So perhaps because of something inherent in me, we could look at these poems as being about connection and disconnection.

“Billy in the Darbies” is probably the best poem Melville ever wrote, and that’s saying something since he wrote almost nothing but poetry (copiously) for the last thirty years of his life. He must have especially valued this “sailor’s ballad” he composed, since his introduction to it grew into *Billy Budd, An Inside Narrative*, published in 1924, several decades after his death. Along with its role as a catalyst for a great work of fiction, I love this poem’s music:

Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep.
I feel it stealing now. Sentry, are you there?
Just ease these darbies at the wrist,
And roll me over fair,
I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.

Love of a poem (or a person, for that matter) is ultimately irrational. I have nothing in common with a young sailor who's about to be hanged. (Unless, of course, I *am* a young sailor who's about to be hanged.) Billy is jolted by the idea of dying alone. A handsome sailor, he's never been alone. And that loneliness seems to trouble him at least as much as the incomprehensible absurdity that he's to be hoisted up at a certain hour, like a "jewell block."

Like so many of us, I was entranced by the public presence of Anne Sexton when she was among us—her defiant, insecure, pissed-off persona. Since the 1970s, however, with the ever-evolving refinement of poets via the MFA process, loving her poems seems to have become a kind of guilty pleasure. Still, it's clear to me that she, and her work, gave us something permanent: a brash, proud, afflicted woman's voice, that we'd never quite heard before, and probably won't hear again, since being squeezed into the tight shoes of a well-to-do suburban housewife isn't the kind of pain that anyone will be likely to sympathize with now. "Her Kind" is her anthem. She's related to the Salem witches, to Lady Godiva, to all the outsiders among us, and to each of us too, since we know we are much wilder than we like to show. And her tone of defiance about that is bracing. *She* doesn't admit she's alone; "I have been her kind," she says, as if there are others. Though the past tense is ominous, too.

In considering Etheridge Knight's "Talking in the Woods with Karl Amorelli," our committee wondered if people would think it's a poem at all. Isn't it just an anecdote about peeing by the side of the road? But we're hoping people hear the subtle bop music: "The old Toyota, green as a frog, coughs and clanks, / Shoots its last wad, throws its last rod, / Sighs and dies, bumps and hops to a stop on the Interstate—" and not just the rhymes but also the alliterations, the consonances (**stop** and **interstate**). Etcetera. And we hope that they will appreciate the way it "walks on both the light and the dark side," as Rosalind Pace remarked to me. On the dark side, the racial status quo (a black man is not going to be picked up on the highway in Massachusetts, but maybe a blonde will) and other universal issues, such as aging. However much the idea of aging makes one feel lonely, this poem is one of connection. Man and boy taking a piss together is a kind of bonding. But the poem is also about the gap between them. Once able to piss, I suppose, Etheridge has subsided into peeing; while, on the light/bright side of things, Karl is still young, and questioning, and growing, and his rainbow arc is good. And they both have

the same Lover (Karl's mom). And clearly—the most important connection—they love each other, despite the age difference and the apparent fact that they aren't literally father and son.

Linda Bamber, who writes stories as well as poems (as well as scholarship, of course, since she's a professor at Tufts), is so adept at saying smart, even profound things, with her informal, jivy, idiosyncratic, talky discourse, that we're especially pleased to include a specimen of her voice here. In "Bird Swerve" we have to smile at the sort of Buddhist parity she gives to the bird, who seems to be flirting with her! It turns out that this comical bird-surprise is only a sample of other surprises that cut closer to the bone: "People, too, can take your breath away." That is, they can thrill you unexpectedly, or hurt you. We have no clue whether the speaker has been hurt by a lover or amazed by the talent of someone she took for a fool, but probably both. We can sense that she's learned to regard our unpredictable species the way she regards the bird, with a keen sense of wonder, and, like many of us, has learned to grip her steering wheel alertly. So it is only at the very end—in the comical, vehement last line—that we can understand that, like many of us, she's been through some terrible road wrecks.

Marie Howe's "What the Living Do" is quite explicit about the daily experience of loss, how it weaves itself into our daily life. The charm of this poem, I find, is how it locates grief as a small but persistent voice amidst the clamor of the clogged drain or the dropped bag of groceries, a voice that's singing in counterpoint with the other voice that keeps telling us, "Oh look, you can catch a glimpse of yourself in the window glass. You're alive!" Either way, it's astounding that we are, and that others aren't. "I am living. I remember you." It's enough to make your jaw drop, this inexplicable circumstance.

Martín Espada's "Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper" is part of an invaluable sub-genre of poems that will alert many of us to our own obliviousness. Another poem like this is Jim Moore's "The History of Roses":

And the history of roses is the history of the work whistle,
the florist for whom holidays are a nightmare,
whose children are asleep by the time he's home Christmas Eve,
who stands alone in the kitchen he remodeled and eats a dish of ice cream
before he goes to bed: he is still young when his first heart attack comes.

In Espada's poem one stunning metaphor tells the whole story: the upturned (supplicating?) hands are burning. So many kinds of work, so many things we thoughtlessly depend on, cost someone else. The salary he or she works for (that allowance of salt) might as well be in recompense for tears. Or maybe not. People would rather do something than nothing,

all things being equal. Still, the speaker's leap from worker to law student, in the blank white space between the two stanzas, implies the American story of upward mobility that, alas, is now less and less possible. And more and more, the people who dispense our legislation seem to behave as if they have no personal experience with how the masses labor, or even of the history of the work whistle. A poem like this might encourage us all to think hard. Or, as the poet William Stafford says in "Traveling Through the Dark," to think "hard for us all." So this is a poem of connection, I suppose. In connecting what he learned in the factory with what he's learned in law school, Espada seems to see the law as the expression of a plea for justice. And, we hope, he'll remember that as a lawyer. And yet how did he get from worker to law student? It's easy to imagine how that mystery opens a kind of vertiginous sense of self, like staring into a cloudy chasm.

Jeffrey Harrison has been writing gorgeous poems about the natural world for decades. His poems are the next-best thing to being out in the woods, or on a lake, or in a garden. Or maybe they're better than experience, since he translates what he sees and hears into language that's as beautiful as the thing itself. But he's also a poet with a fine sense of humor. Since we live in a country governed (I think for the first time) by a President who doesn't have one, it's worth asking why a sense of humor is something we cherish.

To think that I had failed at everything
he had succeeded at—money, status,
connections, an impressive beard—seemed
only self-congratulatory.

To step outside of the self enough to be able to see one's own vanity in describing one's complete failure—we immediately trust a speaker who'd have the smarts and self-perception to say that. In this poem Harrison is alone but not alone, as we are when we are engrossed in reading. The "gasflame blue" of the dragonfly and the "blue lake shimmering" reminds me of something Goethe once wrote about color: that blue is darkness seen through light. At fifty, in the middle of his journey, he's not lost in a dark wood, but floating in a canoe with his two companions, Tolstoy and an insect.

And finally, the turkeys! Who hasn't been amazed by the resurgence of wild turkeys here in Massachusetts? (A rafter of about twenty step with excruciating slowness as they peck at my lawn.) In January Gill O'Neil's poem, "How to Love," these improbable and hilariously oblivious turkeys force her to see a glimpse of herself about to be reborn. How can someone christened "January" (Janus, the god with two faces) not know that she was born to be able to see both the past and the future? But the poem describes the moment when she seems to become aware of this, when, looking forward to another chance to love, she claims her name.

In each of these poems, there's another person present beside the speaker. Billy Budd has the chaplain and his (unfortunately wrong!) expectation his mates will be there with him as he departs. In Sexton's case, the other "person" is the one that the poem is defiantly addressed to, that is "us," the group she feels excluded from. Etheridge has Karl; Bamber has the female bird who's being courted along with her in what can only be described as an interpersonal confrontation; Marie Howe has Johnny; and Harrison has the insect and his book. But who has taken Espada's journey with him? And who is walking with O'Neil across the crunchy, icy grass? In both poems, the second person is "you." The poem is reaching out to you and saying, "Haven't you lived this?" The poem is saying, "Aren't you in the same boat, whether you want to be or not?"

So, yes, there's a theme here. Richard Howard, years ago, wrote a book about poetry called *Alone with America*. Part of my delight in reading is to know that I'm alone. But of course no reader really is. Editing this anthology, I hope we'll develop those rare, non-trivial discussions that poetry can stimulate, even between solitary strangers, those common threads between us that we need to tease out.

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How to Read a Poem

Robert Pinsky

A crucial, defining moment, at the mysterious frontier between the mind and the body, takes place when a feeling or thought takes form in the voice—possibly as speech, but maybe as less than that, as the exhalation of a barely vocalized oh or ah.

I mean the moment between the twinge of an aching back muscle and a muttered “ouch” or at another extreme the moment when a mix of passion, determination and purpose leads to “I disagree” in a meeting or “I love you” in an embrace.

We cross that threshold between concept and breath in two directions, I think: outward of course, but inward as well. In an intense conversation, my effort to understand your words—to “take them in,” as we say—may include my imagining what it feels like to say those words—physically, actually, to say them. That sympathetic, bodily imagining may go back to the infant gazing up at a parental speaking face: so far back that we are mostly unaware of it.

Sometimes, feeling eager or pressed to understand, I might silently “mouth” your words—technical instructions, say, or the best route to my destination, or just a name or a phone number—form them with my lips, maybe with a whisper of breath through them. (C.K. Williams’ great poem “My Mother’s Lips” describes this form of attention.)

That basic, intuitive process, involves the first principle of reading poetry—the most purely vocal of all the arts. (In song, the voice enlarges and transforms to become an instrument, as well as itself.)

So, the three-word advice I might be tempted to give, about “How to Read a Poem”—“read it aloud”—is kind of inaccurate, though usefully compact. “Read it aloud” might lead toward the art of the actor, or the technique of a poet who gives good poetry readings. With all due respect, performance is not what I mean.

I mean something more intimate, more immediate, more physiological, at that mind-body frontier: to feel the poem in your mind’s voice, hearing it in your mind’s ear as you hear the things you say. To achieve that, you may well say the words—mutter them or declaim them, vocalize them or not—as a means to feel what it would be like to say the poet’s words: to need to say them, as Emily Dickinson needed to say “Because I could not stop for Death” or Walt Whitman needed to say “Vigil strange I kept in the field one night.” If the poem works, the reader experiences an echo of that need. That, I think, is demonstrated by the video segments at www.favoritepoem.org.

Here is a specific example of what I mean—one of my favorite examples, because it is brief and to me seems remarkably clear: an untitled, two-line poem by Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864). I invite the reader to say it aloud, or to imagine saying it aloud, maybe moving your lips a little:

On love, on grief, on every human thing,
Time sprinkles Lethe's water with his wing.

The patterns of consonants and vowels in this poem, to me quite beautiful, happen to be unusually clear, by which I mean unusually easy to talk about. At the beginning of the poem, if you say the words, actually or in imagination, three times you will put your upper teeth onto your lower lip to form the “v” or “f” sounds at the ends of “love,” “grief,” and the first syllable of “every.” Another example of this anatomical aspect of poetry, at the end of the poem: three times, you will purse your lips as you say “water with his wing.”

Weirdly, but absolutely, such things matter. I cannot explain why, but these patterns of sound (usually not so distinct), apprehended in the body and by the mind, convey feeling. The physical conviction of Landor's poem relieves me of necessarily knowing that Lethe is the river of forgetting in the Classical underground. The poem's physical presence, in my voice, helps me understand that Lethe is what time sprinkles on everything. How do these artfully arranged vowels and consonants, these sentence-sounds, do that? I don't know. I can't explain this vocal-emotional power any more than I can explain the power of music or of comedy (which, the great comic Sid Caesar said, is music).

Poetry is apprehended by the body and the mind, both. (I think this is why Ezra Pound says, in his *An ABC of Reading*, “poetry is a centaur.”) If you are not inclined to use your mind, you will miss the point. If you are not inclined to use your body, in particular breath and the muscles of speech, you will miss the point. True in poetry, and often true in the rest of life, as well.

There has been a lot of excellent writing and thinking about the ways poetry is different from all the other uses of language. It is also worth considering the ways poetry is continuous with the other uses of language, resembles them, from its position somewhere between speech and song.

Poetry is different from, but also resembles, conversation, teaching, business negotiations, family arguments, joke telling, complaining, medical interviews and many other kinds of interaction. Facial expression, bodily posture, hand gestures, tone of voice, pace, inflection, all amplify and modify the words—make the words more than a transcript.

The equivalent of all that is in a poem, waiting to be animated by each reader's vocal imagination.

How to read a poem? Imagine saying it. Imagine the feeling of needing to say it.

Suggestions for Facilitating Discussion Groups

Common Threads discussion groups are conducted in a variety of settings, from church groups to libraries, to senior centers to schools, and can range from sessions that are open to the public to sessions that consist of a few friends discussing the poems over coffee. There is no right or wrong way to conduct a Common Threads group—what Mass Poetry does is supply the materials and support for engagement with the poems; what you do is take the poems to your community in a way that the shared experience will be enjoyable and valuable. But we can offer some tips—proven methods for hosting a successful and fruitful group.

Alice Kociemba, two-time Guest Editor and many-time Common Threads discussion group leader, says, “Encourage each person to participate. Trust that they will connect with these poems in an authentic and unique way. There are no right and wrong answers, no smart or dumb reactions to these poems. Everyone brings something valuable to the discussion. Not everyone will agree with each other, or like a particular poem. These reactions are also to be welcomed.”

We suggest supplying (or linking to) the Common Threads PDF in your promotion of a public group so that interested participants can familiarize themselves with the poems beforehand, but it is also perfectly fine to simply have copies of the Common Threads poems you’ll discuss on-hand at the event, so that attendees can read them there on the spot.

Within your group, we suggest that the person who finds a particular poem meaningful read that poem aloud to the group, with no worries about stutters or mistakes. Their connection to the poem will come through with their enjoyment in reading it and hearing it recited in their own voice. It’s a strong way to kick off a discussion.

“At almost any poetry reading group experience I have had (and I have facilitated a monthly poetry group at the Falmouth Public Library for the past five years), members who have walked in skeptical about a poet’s work or a particular poem have left the group more open-minded after hearing a poem read by someone who has a connection to the poem,” says Alice.

After the person reads the poem, ask him or her to say why or where they connect with the poem, and from there, the open-ended discussion questions we have supplied in this publication should carry the conversation forward. Or even better, make notes about anything in the poems you don’t completely understand, and ask about those things.

Some members will want a “close reading” of a poem—an analysis of the use of adjectives, the power of the verbs, meter, syntax, and rhyme. This is all well and good, but for group members completely new to poetry, who may be intimidated by the idea of poetic analysis, we would encourage discussing craft as it relates to the meaning and heart of the poem.

Billy in the Darbies

Good of the chaplain to enter Lone Bay
And down on his marrowbones here and pray
For the likes just o' me, Billy Budd.--But look:
Through the port comes the moonshine astray!
It tips the guard's cutlass and silvers this nook;
But 'twill die in the dawning of Billy's last day.
A jewel-block they'll make of me tomorrow,
Pendant pearl from the yardarm-end
Like the eardrop I gave to Bristol Molly--
O, 'tis me, not the sentence they'll suspend.
Ay, ay, all is up; and I must up too,
Early in the morning, aloft from alow.
On an empty stomach now never it would do.
They'll give me a nibble--bit o' biscuit ere I go.
Sure, a messmate will reach me the last parting cup;
But, turning heads away from the hoist and the belay,
Heaven knows who will have the running of me up!
No pipe to those halyards.--But aren't it all sham?
A blur's in my eyes; it is dreaming that I am.
A hatchet to my hawser? All adrift to go?
The drum roll to grog, and Billy never know?
But Donald he has promised to stand by the plank;
So I'll shake a friendly hand ere I sink.
But--no! It is dead then I'll be, come to think.
I remember Taff the Welshman when he sank.
And his cheek it was like the budding pink.
But me they'll lash me in hammock, drop me deep.
Fathoms down, fathoms down, how I'll dream fast asleep.
I feel it stealing now. Sentry, are you there?
Just ease this darbies at the wrist,
And roll me over fair!
I am sleepy, and the oozy weeds about me twist.

Please see this poem's accompanying glossary on next page.

“Billy in the Darbies” Glossary

darbies: handcuffs

Lone Bay: a cell for isolating sailors on a ship, solitary confinement

marrowbones: knees

jewel-block: a pulley

yardarm-end: the tip of the yard (cross piece) of a mast

hoist: the line used for hoisting

belay: the pin to secure a line to a ship’s railing

halyard: the line that hoists a sail

hawser: a heavy rope for mooring or towing a ship

grog: daily ration of rum and water

fathom: 6 feet, a measurement of water depth

Her Kind

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

Talking in the Woods with Karl Amorelli

The old Toyota, green as a frog, coughs and clanks,
Shoots its last wad, throws its last rod,
Sighs and dies, bumps and hops to a stop on the Interstate—
Twenty miles from Worcester, the neat New England
City of three deck flats. Here my lover lives
And sets her plate, and lies late with me in the mornings.
The ride from Boston had / been / a merry-go-round of touching
And talking and wide-eyed smiles and body smells.
Now, like hail striking a tin roof, gravel pelts the fenders.
We get out and look around. There is a lake to our right
Surrounded by green: cedar, oaks, willows, ferns and lilies.
After consultation and imaginations, we decide
That she / could / catch a ride much better than I—
Being blond, blue-eyed, and a woman on the side.
“Well, catch a trucker then,” I smarted, and turned
To Karl, this brown-eyed boy
With curly hair, this love / child of the woman
I love. “C’mon, Karl,” I say,
“Let’s check / out / the lake on this bright and good day.”
We scramble over the fence and walk into the woods.
The beer bears on my bladder. We wander through the trees.
“I gotta pee,” I say—“what about you?”
“Me too.”
Legs apart, urine splattering the dry leaves—
Me looking at the lake—
He looking at me.
“I can pee further than you, Eth.”
“Yeah, I see.”
“And higher, too.”
“Yeah, Karl, the older you are—
The lower your arc.”
“You mean, like flat feet?”
“No—like this.” I make a motion with my hand,
And say, “Like a rainbow, boy.”
“Well? why?—well? why?”
We dance, peace (the last few drops go down our pants),

Shake and zip.

“Well, dude,” I say, “it’s like this—speaking
from a psychological, physiological, chronological, and—
Sexiological standpoint of view...”

“Eth / ridge!”

I laugh. He laughs.

We crash outta the woods, tumble / over / the fence

And face our Lover.

Sunlight glints / off / her glasses.

“What were you / two / doing so long?”

“Well,” I said,

“Karl was pissing—

Me!—I / was / peeing.”

Bird Swerves

Blackbird called Redwinged
 and I
both startle when I stand
and turn. Bird expertly
 swerves, flies on; but I
spend a few thousand mind moments
stopped and blank.
Now please don't think
I've never seen that red wingstripe before.
I have, of course. Once I

and a female Redwing hoped to mate with
we even treated to a full intentional
display. Spreading for sex

Bird hopped at my feet
 saying, See see see
my nice stripe!

"I do," I said,
"if that's any help";
but this
 unexpected
 airborne
 almost-fluorescence
was unearthly, not endearing.

I could only take it in
 belatedly;
as the mind, it seems,
knows its own volition only *after* a delay
the hand reaching for the glass
before the brain has been apprised.

 (They've proven this on MRI's.)
I was surprised

surprised.

People, too, can take your breath away:

talent in a proven fool
betrayal by a love. Then you have to swerve
way fast
or crash the whole damn truck.

What the Living Do

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there. And the Drano won't work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven't called. This is the everyday we spoke of. It's winter again: the sky's a deep, headstrong blue, and the sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heat's on too high in here and I can't turn it off. For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street, the bag breaking,

I've been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying along those wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it. Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called that yearning.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to pass. We want whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass, say, the window of the corner video store, and I'm gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I'm speechless: I am living. I remember you.

Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper

At sixteen, I worked after high school hours
at a printing plant
that manufactured legal pads:
Yellow paper
stacked seven feet high
and leaning
as I slipped cardboard
between the pages,
then brushed red glue
up and down the stack.
No gloves: fingertips required
for the perfection of paper,
smoothing the exact rectangle.
Sluggish by 9 PM, the hands
would slide along suddenly sharp paper,
and gather slits thinner than the crevices
of the skin, hidden.
Then the glue would sting,
hands oozing
till both palms burned
at the punchclock.

Ten years later, in law school,
I knew that every legal pad
was glued with the sting of hidden cuts,
that every open lawbook
was a pair of hands
upturned and burning.

Ivan Ilyich at the Lake

When the dragonfly landed on my book,
I was drifting on the lake in a kayak
reading Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich"
in a paperback so old that each yellowed page
came loose with a tiny crackling sound
as I turned it—the book itself as deciduous
as the maples on shore, which had started to turn.
I was fifty, and naturally the story
had led to thoughts about how false or true
my life had been, to all the ways
I was and was not like Ivan Ilyich.
To think that I had failed at everything
he had succeeded at—money, status,
connections, an impressive beard—seemed
only self-congratulatory. I had my own
sins and shortcomings, which I avoided
with my own evasive maneuvers.

I was just going back to the story when
the dragonfly appeared, like an answer
that refused to answer other than with
itself, seeming to ask nothing of me but that I
look carefully through my reading glasses
at the intricate veined structure of its wings,
the mineral sheen of its out-of-proportion eyes,
and its long, thin, segmented tail of gasflame blue
that pulsed above the still-fastened page.
I was grateful for the quick gift of its visit,
But I saw that it too might be only
a diversion, a way to avoid looking hard
at myself—and just then it took off
with a sudden snapping flutter of its wings
and darted away in erratic flight,
leaving me to return to Ilyich's death,
the blue lake shimmering all around me.

How to Love

After stepping into the world again,
there is that question of how to love,
how to bundle yourself against the frosted morning—
the crunch of icy grass underfoot, the scrape
of cold wipers along the windshield—
and convert time into distance.

What song to sing down an empty road
as you begin your morning commute?
And is there enough in you to see, really see,
the three wild turkeys crossing the street
with their featherless heads and stilt-like legs
in search of a morning meal? Nothing to do
but hunker down, wait for them to safely cross.

As they amble away, you wonder if they want
to be startled back into this world. Maybe you do, too,
waiting for all this to give way to love itself,
to look into the eyes of another and feel something—
the pleasure of a new lover in the unbroken night,
your wings folded around him, on the other side
of this ragged January, as if a long sleep has ended.

General Discussion Questions

for use with all poems

First, what brings this poem to life? Then, what brings this poem to life for you?

Note: The first will probably lead to exploration of elements of craft (the title, beginning, ending of a poem, the images and language, the form, the sound, the way the poem is placed on the page, etc.). The second question should elicit deeper layers of meaning (some personal, some philosophical).

Read the poem out loud and listen for the accented syllables. Is there a musicality to the mixture of accented and unaccented syllables? Does the poem sound dissonant or melodic? How does the sound of the poem affect your understanding of it?

With music comes tone. What does the tone of the poem suggest? Is it quiet and reflective, loud and bombastic, angry, sad, joyous? Is there a shift in tone and a variety of emotions working together or at odds with each other?

Look at the lines of the poem. Think about the ways in which each line begins and ends. Are the words nouns or adjectives, conjunctions or pronouns? Do the words, on their own, cause the reader to pause and reflect on the importance of the line or do they carry the reader forward through the line (or onto the next line)?

What about punctuation? What purpose does it serve the line? Look into the line itself and think about how commas and dashes, parentheses and semicolons direct the reading of the poem.

Specific Discussion Questions

Alan Feldman, for use with each poem

“Billy in the Darbies”

When do you think Billy is speaking? Is he alive or dead? Is he alive at the beginning of the poem, and dead at the end? How can that be?

“Her Kind”

Do you think the speaker is a true alien, or a kind of Snow White “rearranging the disaligned,” or a martyr, or all three, and how is that possible? And why do you think she uses the past tense? What do you think she is like now?

“Talking in the Woods with Karl Amorelli”

Do you think this speaker (Etheridge, we’ll assume) thinks about aging all the time, or is there something about Karl that brings on such thoughts? Also, how does he seem to have side-stepped the Oedipal rivalry with Karl (they both have the same Lover), or has he? How do the references to Nature and to Race affect the poem for you? How do you think the backslashes change the lines in which they appear, and why do you think the poet used them?

“Bird Swerve”

The final “truck” metaphor seems to come out of nowhere. Is the reader forced to swerve here? Or, like so many good surprises in poems, is this one prepared for? How do you think saying “the whole damn truck” is different from saying “the whole truck”?

“What the Living Do”

Like so many poems, this one pivots on a “but” where Howe writes, “But there are moments.” What if the speaker had said “And there are moments”? How would that change your understanding of what she’s saying? Finally, do you think the “but” says something about how she regards Johnny’s death? What does it mean to say, “What you finally gave up?” as opposed to saying, “What you finally lost?”

“Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper”

Why do you think the speaker went to law school, and how does his conception of the law differ, if it does, from yours? Would the poem have been different if he’d lost a finger doing factory work?

“Ivan Ilyich at the Lake”

In Tolstoy’s story, Ivan is confined indoors, dying, and reviewing his life. The speaker here, though, is at leisure in a canoe on a beautiful day. Ivan is painfully reviewing the

way his life was devoted to the wrong things, to vanity. The speaker here, though, seems to be doing things we'd all like to do: observing real beauty in nature and reading a good, substantial book. Do you think the beauty of the setting is an antidote for the bleak self-reflection occasioned by the book, or is it also an important part of what the speaker is learning?

“How to Love”

Who do you think is the “you” the poet is instructing about love—herself, or us, or both? And why turkeys? What if, say, a deer had been startled on the road? Or a line of ducklings? What do you think can be learned, specifically, from the image of the turkeys?

Writing Prompts

Alan Feldman, inspired by each poem

Whatever the subject you choose, these prompts ask you, also, to copy some of the “dance step” of the poem you’re responding to, its rhetorical pattern. I’ve found that the more arbitrary these patterns seem, the more game-like the exercise, the easier it is to write your poem.

“Billy in the Darbies”

Write a poem in which the speaker, contemplating something momentous, uses many terms from his own trade or occupation. As Melville does, make sure that he refers to a specific memory (“like the ear-drop I gave to Bristol Molly”); to his natural surroundings (“the moon-shine”); and that he ends by describing a dream.

“Her Kind”

Write a poem of three stanzas of equal length, like Sexton’s, where each stanza begins with the words “I have [verb].” Each stanza should end with the same line, and the line before it should begin with the same phrase, the way Sexton begins each of these lines with “A woman like that...”

“Talking in the Woods with Karl Amorelli”

Write a poem, like Knight’s, in which the speaker and another, or others, are walking somewhere. The walk’s location and purpose should be clear. Include actual dialogue. Include some description of the environment. End with a line of dialogue.

“Bird Swerve”

Write a poem in short lines and short stanzas, in a kind of telegraphic style like Bamber’s. Include along the way the phrase “Now please don’t think,” and the phrase “I could only take it in belatedly,” and the phrase “I was [feeling word], [same feeling word], the way Bamber says, “I was surprised/ surprised.” Conclude with a sentence that begins with a general statement about people.

“What the Living Do”

Address a poem about what you’re doing during the day to someone close to you who is dead or has been absent for a long time. As Howe does, mention specific details (including proper nouns like Drano). Include early on a statement like, “This the [something] we spoke of.” Mention a season. Describe the weather. Write a statement that starts “I’ve been thinking ...” and another that starts “I thought it again.” Conclude with a section that starts “But there are moments.” And end with a line that includes both “I” and “you.”

“Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper”

Begin a poem by mentioning your age at a time in your far past, and describing some work or activity you did then in substantial detail. End this description with a specific image. In the second stanza begin by saying “X years later.” (As Espada does, omit anything that happened between these two periods, just leave a white space). End with a metaphor related to the image at the end of the first stanza.

“Ivan Ilyich at the Lake”

Write a poem in which you are reading, or watching TV, or otherwise taking in a story. Describe in detail, the way Harrison does, where you are while doing this, and even what the book or TV or device looks like. Give a few details from the story too. Mention a color somewhere in the poem, and end with an image that contains this color.

“How to Love”

Write a poem entitled “How to ” and address it to a “you.” For example, “How to Grieve,” “How to Daydream,” “How to Wish,” “How to Forgive,” “How to Hate” etc. Then tell a story illustrating this learning. The story should include an encounter with an animal, or a person. Near the end you should suggest, subtly, that you and this animal or person have something in common, as O’Neil does when she mentions her wings. You should begin your poem by describing the season, and end the poem by referring to this season again.

About the Poets

Learn more at poets.org and poetryfoundation.org.

Linda Bamber is a Professor of English at Tufts University who writes poetry and prose. Her poems have appeared in *The Harvard Review*, *Ploughshares* and elsewhere, and her poetry collection *Metropolitan Tang* was published by David R. Godine. Widely reprinted and anthologized, her critical book on Shakespeare, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: Gender and Genre in Shakespeare*, was published by Stanford University Press. She is currently writing an epistolary novel based on the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Martín Espada's latest collection of poems is *Vivas to Those Who Have Failed* (Norton, 2016). His honors include the Shelley Memorial Award, the Robert Creeley Award, the National Hispanic Cultural Center Literary Award, the PEN/Revson Fellowship and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His book *The Republic of Poetry* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. A former tenant lawyer, Espada was born in Brooklyn, NY and is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Jeffrey Harrison is the author of five full-length books of poetry, including *The Singing Underneath*, selected by James Merrill for the National Poetry Series in 1987, and, most recently, *Into Daylight* (Tupelo Press, 2014), which won the Dorset Prize and was selected by Massachusetts Center for the Book as a Must-Read Book for 2015. Honors include fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the NEA, and the Bogliasco Foundation, and his poems have appeared widely in magazines, journals, and anthologies, including *Best American Poetry 2016* and *2017*. He lives in MA.

Marie Howe's four volumes of poetry include the most recent *Magdalene: Poems* (W.W. Norton, 2017) and *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time* (W.W. Norton, 2009). Her poems have appeared in *the New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. A former Cambridge resident, Howe has taught at Tufts University, Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, and NYU. She has been awarded fellowships from the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe College, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Howe was the Poet Laureate of New York State from 2012 to 2014.

Etheridge Knight, born in 1931 in Corinth, Mississippi, served in the U.S Army in Korea from 1947-1951 and returned with a shrapnel wound that caused him to fall deeper into a drug addiction that had begun during his service. In 1960, he was arrested for robbery and sentenced to eight years in prison, during which time he began writing poetry, going on to publish and perform to both popular and critical acclaim. He received

honors from such institutions as the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Poetry Society of America. In 1990 he earned a bachelor's degree in American poetry and criminal justice from Martin Center University in Indianapolis. He died in 1991.

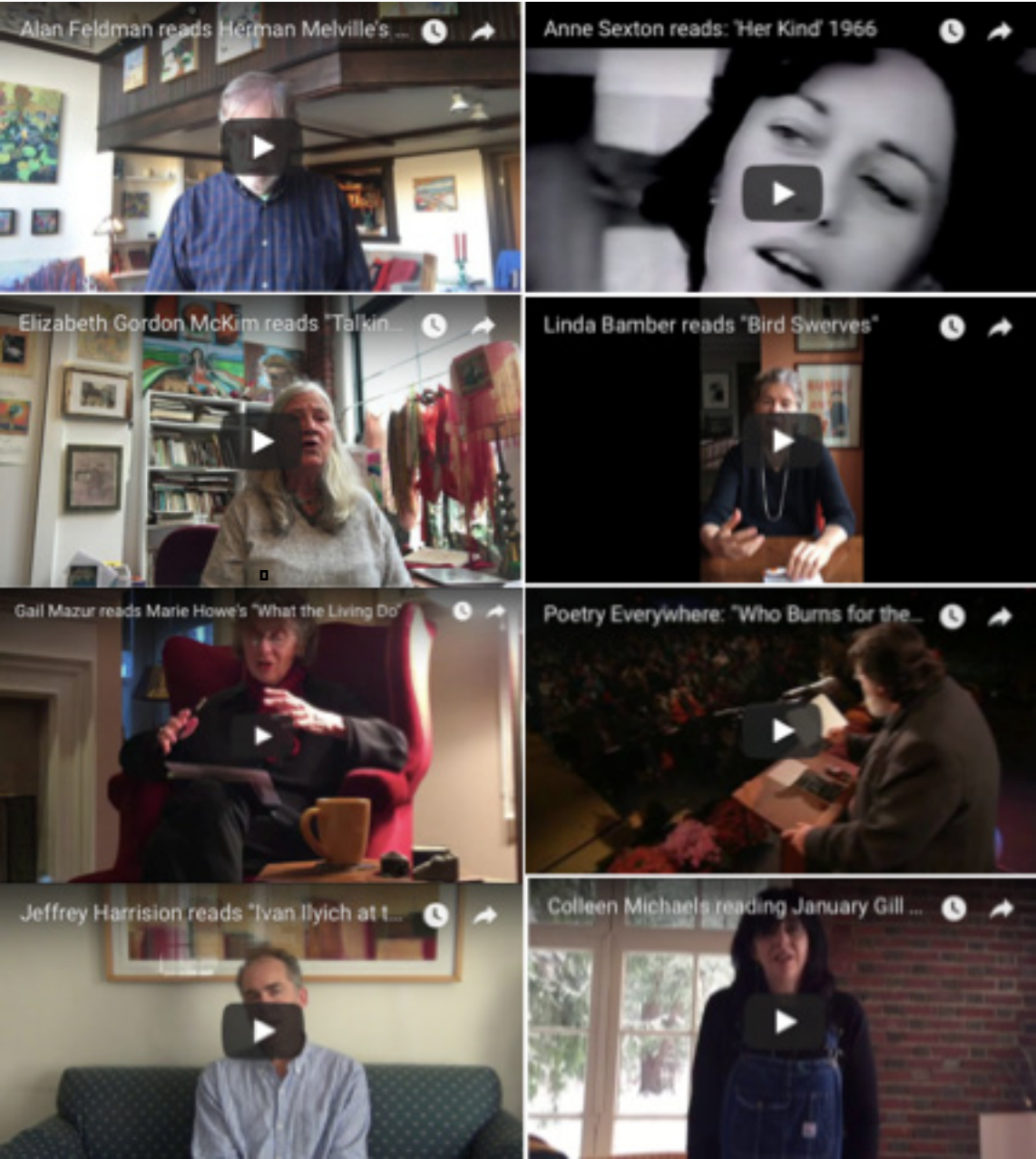
Born in New York City in 1819 to a Bostonian father, **Herman Melville** moved to Pittsfield, MA in 1850. His 1851 masterpiece, *Moby-Dick, or the Whale*, considered by modern scholars to be one of the great American novels, was dismissed by Melville's contemporaries. He eventually stopped writing fiction and turned to writing poetry, alongside his 20-year career as a customs inspector. He self-published five volumes before his death in 1891. The Civil War was a principal subject of his verse; his first book of poems, *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866), is regarded by many critics as being as ambitious and rich as any of his novels.

January Gill O'Neil is the author of *Misery Islands* (2014) and *Underlife* (2009), both published by CavanKerry Press. A third collection, *Rewilding*, will be published by CavanKerry Press in fall 2018. She is the executive director of the Massachusetts Poetry Festival and an assistant professor of English at Salem State University. She is a board of trustees member with the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) and Montserrat College of Art. *Misery Islands* was selected for a 2015 Paterson Award for Literary Excellence. Additionally, it was selected by Mass Center for the Book as a Must-Read Book for 2015, and won the 2015 Massachusetts Book Award.

Born in Newton, MA in 1928, **Anne Sexton** won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967 for her book *Live or Die*. It was only some ten years earlier that she enrolled in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education to pursue poetry writing with encouragement from her doctor, in order to help her manage postpartum depression and consequent breakdowns that left her hospitalized. She published seven books of poetry in her lifetime, and went on to win numerous honors and awards, including the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, the American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship, and the Shelley Memorial Prize. She also received a Guggenheim Fellowship, grants from the Ford Foundation, honorary degrees, and held professorships at Colgate University and Boston University. She died in 1974 at the age of 46.

A version of many of these biographies originally appeared on poets.org, the website of the Academy of American Poets, and on poetryfoundation.org. All rights reserved.

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masspoetry.org/mediapackage2018



Resources for Poetry Exploration

This is by no means a comprehensive list—rather, it is a starting point, noting some of the resources we find richest for those beginning to explore poetry (as well as those for whom poetry is a daily part of life).

Poetry Guides for Reading and Writing

How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry

by Edward Hirsch (ISBN-13: 978-0156005661)

Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life

by Anne Lamott (ISBN-13: 978-0385480017)

A Poetry Handbook: A Prose Guide to Understanding and Writing Poetry

by Mary Oliver (ISBN-13: 978-0156724005)

The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide

by Robert Pinsky (ISBN-13: 978-0374526177)

The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms

by Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (ISBN-13: 978-0393321784)

Anthologies

Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology

edited by Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz (ISBN-13: 978-0393048209)

Good Poems

selected and introduced by Garrison Keillor (ISBN-13: 978-0142003442)

The Ecco Anthology of International Poetry

edited by Ilya Kaminsky and Susan Harris (ISBN-13: 978-0061583247)

Websites

The Academy of American Poets: poets.org

Favorite Poem Project: fpp.org

How a Poem Happens: howapoemhappens.blogspot.com

The Poetry Foundation: poetryfoundation.org

Mass Poetry: masspoetry.org

About Mass Poetry

masspoetry.org

Mass Poetry believes in the power of words. We support poets and poetry in Massachusetts, help to broaden the audience of poetry readers, bring poetry to readers of all ages, and transform people's lives through inspiring verse. We are a tax exempt, non-profit organization. Our programs include:

Poetry on the T

Poems in place of ads on the MBTA

Raining Poetry

Poems that appear on the sidewalk when it rains

The Massachusetts Poetry Festival (Celebrating 10 years May 4-6, 2018!)

Three days of readings, workshops, and panels

Student Day of Poetry

Youth program including festivals, which bring students together for intensive days of writing-generative poetry workshops, performances, and open mics, held both in and out of schools; and poets-in-residence, which provide schools with regular poetry readings, workshops, and mentorship

Professional Development for Teachers

Workshops and seminars for educators led by successful and engaging poet-instructors

Common Threads

Poetry outreach program that facilitates the creation of poetry reading and discussion groups throughout MA, centered on a publication of seven to ten poems by Massachusetts poets, videos, and a guide to reading and discussing the poems

U35 Reading Series

Bi-monthly reading series for poets under the age of 35

Online Publications

Weekly articles and poems, continuous promotion of new books by Massachusetts poets, and more. Plus: facebook.com/masspoetry | twitter.com/masspoetry | [@masspoetry](https://masspoetry.org)

Sign up to receive our weekly newsletter and announcements of upcoming MA poetry events at masspoetry.org!

About the Common Threads Team

Alan Feldman, guest editor of Common Threads 2018, is the author of *Immortality*, which was awarded the 2016 Massachusetts Book Award for Poetry, and *The Golden Coin*, forthcoming in March 2018. He is professor emeritus and past chair of English at Framingham State University, and for 22 years taught the advanced creative writing class at Harvard University's Radcliffe Seminars. He offers free, drop-in poetry workshops at the Framingham, MA, public library near his home, and in the summer at the Wellfleet library.

Laurin Macios, executive director of Mass Poetry, holds an MFA in Poetry from the University of New Hampshire, where she taught on fellowship. Her work appears in *Salamander*, *Green Mountains Review online*, [*PANK*], *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *The Pinch*, *Third Wednesday*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist for the 2014 Boston Review/92Y Unterberg Poetry Center Discovery Prize, and the 2016 Hudson Book Prize and 2016 St Lawrence Prize, both from Black Lawrence Press. Formerly the Program Director of the Poetry Society of America and Mass Poetry, she splits her time between New York and Massachusetts and can be found online at laurinbeckermacios.com.

Sara Siegel, program director of Mass Poetry, is a lifelong writer and crafter based in Somerville. After graduating Washington University in St. Louis and working at women's health organizations in NYC, she earned a Masters in Public Administration at UVM while working with Vermont Children's Trust Foundation. Sara spent three years as the Development and Alumni Relations Associate with School Year Abroad, and her short stories have been published in *Wild Violet*, *Vantage Point*, *Toasted Cheese Literary Journal* and *Cleaver Magazine*. Her sketch comedy group, Mister Bismuth, regularly performs at ImprovBoston in Cambridge.

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