**A Valentine for Ernest Mann**

You can't order a poem like you order a taco.

Walk up to the counter, say, "I'll take two"

and expect it to be handed back to you

on a shiny plate.

Still, I like your spirit.

Anyone who says, "Here's my address,

write me a poem," deserves something in reply.

So I'll tell you a secret instead:

poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,

they are sleeping. They are the shadows

drifting across our ceilings the moment

before we wake up. What we have to do

is live in a way that lets us find them.

Once I knew a man who gave his wife

two skunks for a valentine.

He couldn't understand why she was crying.

"I thought they had such beautiful eyes."

And he was serious. He was a serious man

who lived in a serious way. Nothing was ugly

just because the world said so. He really

liked those skunks. So, he reinvented them

as valentines and they became beautiful.

At least, to him. And the poems that had been hiding

in the eyes of the skunks for centuries

crawled out and curled up at his feet.

Maybe if we reinvent whatever our lives give us

we find poems. Check your garage, the odd sock

in your drawer, the person you almost like, but not quite.

And let me know.

--

Naomi Shihab Nye

### "A Book"

by Adelaide Love

A book, I think, is very like  
A little golden door  
That takes me into places  
Where I've never been before.

It leads me into fairyland  
Or countries strange and far  
And, best of all, the golden door  
Always stands ajar.

## Heirlooms

Up in the attic,  
Down on my knees.  
Lifetimes of boxes,  
Timeless to me.  
Letters and photographs,  
Yellowed with years,  
Some bringing laughter,  
Some bringing tears.  
  
Time never changes,  
The memories, the faces  
Of loved ones, who bring to me,  
All that I come from,  
And all that I live for,  
And all that I’m going to be.  
My precious family  
Is more than an heirloom to me.  
  
Wisemen and shepherds,  
Down on their knees,  
Bringing their treasures  
To lay at his feet.  
Who was this wonder,  
Baby yet king?   
Living and dying;  
He gave life to me.  
  
Time never changes,  
The memory, the moment  
His love first pierced through me,  
Telling all that I came from,  
And all that I live for,  
And all that I’m going to be.  
My precious savior  
Is more than an heirloom to me.  
  
My precious jesus  
Is more than an heirloom to me.

--Amy Grant

**Icicles**

Mark Irwin

Slender beards of light

Hang from the railing.

My son shows me

Their array of sizes:

One oddly shaped,

Its queer curve,

A clear walrus tooth,

Illumined, tinseled.

We watch crystal cones

Against blue sky;

Suddenly some break loose:

An echo of piano notes.

The sun argues

Ice to liquid.

Tiny buds of water,

Pendent on dropper tips,

Push to pear shapes:

Prisms that shiver silver

In a slight wind

Before falling.

Look, he says laughing,

A Pinocchio nose,

And he grabs one

In his tiny hand,

Touching the clear carrot,

Cold to his lips.

# The Red Wheelbarrow

  by [William Carlos Williams](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/119)

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens.

**Those Winter Sundays**

Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early

And put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,

Then with cracked hands that ached

From labor in the weekday weather made

banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.

When the rooms were warm, he’d call,

And slowly I would rise and dress,

Fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,

Who had driven out the cold

And polished my good shoes as well.

What did I know, what did I know of love’s austere and lonely offices?

**The Guild**

Sharon Olds

Every night, as my grandfather sat

In the darkened room in front of the fire,

The liquor like fire in his hand, his eye

Glittering meaninglessly in the light

From the flames, his glass eye baleful and stony,

A young man sat with him

In silence and darkness, a college boy with

White skin, unlined, a narrow

Beautiful face, a broad domed

Forehead, and eyes amber as the resin from

Trees too young to be cut yet.

This was his son, who sat, an apprentice,

Night after night, his glass of coals

Next to the old man’s glass of coals,

And he drank when the old man drank, and he learned

The craft of oblivion—that young man

Not yet cruel, his hair dark as the

soil that feeds the tree’s roots,

that son who would come to be in his turn

better at this than the teacher, the apprentice

who would pass his master in cruelty and oblivion,

drinking steadily by the flames in the blackness,

that young man my father.

**Pilot Error**

(For Juliet Leventhal Balgley 1914-1965)

The phone rings on a Sunday afternoon.

“There’s been an accident,” Juliet’s

Husband says. I go on folding laundry,

Matching every corner, every seam

Exactly, caressing terry velvet

On Sunday, after the phone rings,

I stack the towels, make

Of them four piles, four

Pillars. “The plane went down

Juliet’s not expected. . .” I shake

Out socks, press them flat together,

Roll them into neat, tight fists.

“I’ll get back to you,” he says.

I go back to laundry, the white

Sheets I pull from the line—day-

Filled blanks—stiff, cool, I

Stretch them wide across my breasts.

Juliet is not like her name, not

Fourteen but fifty, and thickly warm

As he furnace that holds off winter.

The phone rings. I carry inside

My basket of clean and the phone talks

Funeral, me asking when as if there is

Still a clock and there is still time.

**Metaphor**

Eva Merriam

Morning is

a new sheet of paper

for you to write on.

Whatever you want to say,

All day,

Until night

Folds it up

And flies it away.

The bright words and the dark words

Are gone

Until dawn

And a new day

To write on.

# A Boy Juggling a Soccer Ball

  by Christopher Merrill

after practice: right foot

to left foot, stepping forward and back,

to right foot and left foot,

and left foot up to his thigh, holding

it on his thigh as he twists

around in a circle, until it rolls

down the inside of his leg,

like a tickle of sweat, not catching

and tapping on the soft

side of his foot, and juggling

once, twice, three times,

hopping on one foot like a jump-roper

in the gym, now trapping

and holding the ball in midair,

balancing it on the instep

of his weak left foot, stepping forward

and forward and back, then

lifting it overhead until it hangs there;

and squaring off his body,

he keeps the ball aloft with a nudge

of his neck, heading it

from side to side, softer and softer,

like a dying refrain,

until the ball, slowing, balances

itself on his hairline,

the hot sun and sweat filling his eyes

as he jiggles this way

and that, then flicking it up gently,

hunching his shoulders

and tilting his head back, he traps it

in the hollow of his neck,

and bending at the waist, sees his shadow,

his dangling T-shirt, the bent

blades of brown grass in summer heat;

and relaxing, the ball slipping

down his back. . .and missing his foot.

He wheels around, he marches

over the ball, as if it were a rock

he stumbled into, and pressing

his left foot against it, he pushes it

against the inside of his right

until it pops into the air, is heeled

over his head--the rainbow!--

and settles on his extended thigh before

rolling over his knee and down

his shin, so he can juggle it again

from his left foot to his right foot

--and right foot to left foot to thigh--

as he wanders, on the last day

of summer, around the empty field.

**Artifact**

Locked in a drawer

It is there, waiting  
Lying in a deep sleep  
You have not seen it  
And perhaps never will  
It is not made for  
Such mad eyes  
You are a terrible judge  
But I am a jailer  
It is me, who has  
Imprisoned it so,   
An old photo of us  
And I gaze at it  
Our smiles were   
Almost too guilty

Stefanie Fontker

# Early Memory

  by January Gill O'Neil

I remember picking up a fistful

of sand, smooth crystals, like hourglass sand

and throwing it into the eyes of a boy. Johnny

or Danny or Kevin—*he* was not important.

I was five and I knew he would cry.

I remember everything about it—

the sandbox in the corner of the room

at Cinderella Day Care; Ms. Lee,

who ran over after the boy wailed for his mother,

her stern look as the words *No snack* formed on her lips.

My hands with their gritty, half-mooned fingernails

I hid in the pockets of my blue and white dress.

How she found them and uncurled small sandy fists.

There must have been such rage in me, to give such pain

to another person. This afternoon,

I saw a man pull a gold chain off the neck

of a woman as she crossed the street.

She cried out with a sound that bleached me.

I walked on, unable to help,

knowing that fire in childhood

clenched deep in my pockets all the way home.

**Pirate Story**

  by [Robert Louis Stevenson](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/137)

Three of us afloat in the meadow by the swing,

Three of us aboard in the basket on the lea.

Winds are in the air, they are blowing in the spring,

And waves are on the meadow like the waves there are at sea.

Where shall we adventure, to-day that we’re afloat,

Wary of the weather and steering by a star?

Shall it be to Africa, a-steering of the boat,

To Providence, or Babylon, or off to Malabar?

Hi! but here’s a squadron a-rowing on the sea—

Cattle on the meadow a-charging with a roar!

Quick, and we’ll escape them, they’re as mad as they can be,

The wicket is the harbour and the garden is the shore.

# 'Rain' A teacher asked Paul what he would remember from third grade, and he sat a long time before writing "this year somebody tutched me on the sholder" and turned his paper in. Later she showed it to me as an example of her wasted life. The words he wrote were large as houses in a landscape. He wanted to go inside them and live, he could fill in the windows of "o" and "d" and be safe while outside birds building nests in drainpipes knew nothing of the coming rain. -- Naomi Shihab Nye

# Going Down Hill on a Bicycle

  by Henry Charles Beeching

*A Boy's Song*

With lifted feet, hands still,

I am poised, and down the hill

Dart, with heedful mind;

The air goes by in a wind.

Swifter and yet more swift,

Till the heart with a mighty lift

Makes the lungs laugh, the throat cry:—

"O bird, see; see, bird, I fly.

"Is this, is this your joy?

O bird, then I, though a boy,

For a golden moment share

Your feathery life in air!"

Say, heart, is there aught like this

In a world that is full of bliss?

'Tis more than skating, bound

Steel-shod to the level ground.

Speed slackens now, I float

Awhile in my airy boat;

Till, when the wheels scarce crawl,

My feet to the treadles fall.

Alas, that the longest hill

Must end in a vale; but still,

Who climbs with toil, wheresoe'er,

Shall find wings waiting there.

# My Aunts

  by [Meghan O'Rourke](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/1579)

Grew up on the Jersey Shore in the 1970s.

Always making margaritas in the kitchen,

always laughing and doing their hair up pretty,

sharing lipstick and shoes and new juice diets;

always splitting the bills to the last penny,

stealing each other’s clothes,

loving one another then turning and complaining

as soon as they walked out the door. Each one with her doe eyes,

each one younger than the last,

each older the next year, one year

further from their girlhoods of swimming

at Sandy Hook, doing jackknives off the diving board

after school, all of them

being loved by one boy and then another,

all driving further from the local fair, further from Atlantic City.

They used to smoke in their cars,

rolling the windows down and letting their red nails

hang out, little stop lights:

Stop now, before the green

comes to cover your long brown bodies.

# Pledge

  by Elizabeth Powell

Republic, your cool hands

On my schoolgirl shoulders.

Not sure what *allegiances* meant

Until the vows were held by heart,

By memory, by rote, by benign betrothal.

Republic, you were mine, I knew

Because of Mother's religious pamphlets:

*Lindsay for Mayor.*

*McGovern for President.*

*How to Register Voters.*

I didn't ever want to go to school

On Saturdays. The baby-sitter said

If Nixon won, I'd have to go. Me,

Your most cherished child bride.

I wanted a white communion dress

Like the ones the Catholic girls wore.

Republic, you know I wanted to play

Cards with Mother. Mother smoking

Marlboros, watching Watergate all week.

Citizen Mother all consumed at that confessional.

I liked the name Betsy Ross.

I liked the idea of sewing flags.

I liked the tattered textbook about the colonies.

So tender, so tender. My Republic,

I am pledged by my childish troth

So strangely to you.

# To a Poor Old Woman

  by [William Carlos Williams](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/119)

munching a plum on

the street a paper bag

of them in her hand

They taste good to her

They taste good

to her. They taste

good to her

You can see it by

the way she gives herself

to the one half

sucked out in her hand

Comforted

a solace of ripe plums

seeming to fill the air

They taste good to her

# The Portrait

by [Stanley Kunitz](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/2)

My mother never forgave my father

for killing himself,

especially at such an awkward time

and in a public park,

that spring

when I was waiting to be born.

She locked his name

in her deepest cabinet

and would not let him out,

though I could hear him thumping.

When I came down from the attic

with the pastel portrait in my hand

of a long-lipped stranger

with a brave moustache

and deep brown level eyes,

she ripped it into shreds

without a single word

and slapped me hard.

In my sixty-fourth year

I can feel my cheek

still burning.

# The Swing

  by [Robert Louis Stevenson](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/137)

How do you like to go up in a swing,

Up in the air so blue?

Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing

Ever a child can do!

Up in the air and over the wall,

Till I can see so wide,

River and trees and cattle and all

Over the countryside—

Till I look down on the garden green,

Down on the roof so brown—

Up in the air I go flying again,

Up in the air and down!

### The Black Snake

*When the black snake*

*flashed onto the morning road,*

*and the truck could not swerve-*

*death, that is how it happens...*

*...he is as beautiful and quiet*

*as a dead brother.*

*I leave him under the leaves*

*and drive on, thinking*

*about death: its suddenness*

*its terrible weight,*

*its certain coming. Yet under*

*reason burns a brighter fire,...*

*It is the story of endless good fortune.*

*I says to oblivion: not me!'*

*It is the light at the center of every cell.*

*It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward*

*happily all spring.....before*

*he came to the road.*

*Mary Oliver*

**Blackberry Eating**

I love to go out in late September  
among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries  
to eat blackberries for breakfast,  
the stalks very prickly, a penalty  
they earn for knowing the black art  
of blackberry-making; and as I stand among them  
lifting the stalks to my mouth, the ripest berries  
fall almost unbidden to my tongue,  
as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words  
like strengths or squinched,  
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,  
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well  
in the silent, startled, icy, black language  
of blackberry -- eating in late September. Galway Kinnell

**Litany**

You are the bread and the knife,  
The crystal goblet and the wine...  
-Jacques Crickillon  
  
You are the bread and the knife,  
the crystal goblet and the wine.  
You are the dew on the morning grass  
and the burning wheel of the sun.  
You are the white apron of the baker,  
and the marsh birds suddenly in flight.  
  
However, you are not the wind in the orchard,  
the plums on the counter,  
or the house of cards.  
And you are certainly not the pine-scented air.  
There is just no way that you are the pine-scented air.  
  
It is possible that you are the fish under the bridge,  
maybe even the pigeon on the general's head,  
but you are not even close  
to being the field of cornflowers at dusk.  
  
And a quick look in the mirror will show  
that you are neither the boots in the corner  
nor the boat asleep in its boathouse.  
  
It might interest you to know,  
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,  
that I am the sound of rain on the roof.  
  
I also happen to be the shooting star,  
the evening paper blowing down an alley  
and the basket of chestnuts on the kitchen table.  
  
I am also the moon in the trees  
and the blind woman's tea cup.  
But don't worry, I'm not the bread and the knife.  
You are still the bread and the knife.  
You will always be the bread and the knife,  
not to mention the crystal goblet and--somehow--the wine.

Billy Collins

**Shooting**

**by Raymond Carver**  
  
I wade through wheat up to my belly,   
cradling a shotgun in my arms.   
Tess is asleep back at the ranch house.   
The moon pales. Then loses face completely  
as the sun spears up over the mountains.   
  
Why do I pick this moment  
to remember my aunt taking me aside that time  
and saying, *What I am going to tell you now  
you will remember every day of your life?*  
But that's all I can remember.   
  
I've never been able to trust memory. My own  
or anyone else's. I'd like to know what on earth  
I'm doing here in this strange regalia  
It's my friend's wheat--this much is true.   
And right now, his dog is on point.   
  
\*  
  
Tess is opposed to killing for sport,   
or any other reason. Yet not long ago she  
threatened to kill me. The dog inches forward.   
I stop moving. I can't see or hear  
my breath any longer.   
  
Step by tiny step, the day advances. Suddenly,   
the air explodes with birds.   
Tess sleeps through it. When she wakes,   
October will be over. Guns and talk  
of shooting behind us.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. I'd wear my new shoes.  All shiny and red;  And sparkly too;  With thin straps of blue.  I looked on my dresser.  I looked on my chair.  I looked in the closet.  The shoes were not there.  Peered under the bed;  And around the floor;  Yet, I could not see  My new shoes anymore…    2. Flip flops/high tops  roller wheels/high heels  relaxing slippers/swimming flippers  comfy flats/even shoes for dogs and cats.  At the store  theres tons of shoes  it makes it hard  for me to choose  On the floor  are shoes in bins  and upon the shelves  are moccasins. | 3. New shoes, new shoes,  Red and pink and blue shoes.  Tell me, what would you choose,  If they'd let us buy?  Buckle shoes, bow shoes,  Pretty pointy-toe shoes,  Strappy, cappy low shoes;  Let's have some to try.  4. 39 shoes....39 shoes  What does that tell you?  What's a gal to do  When she's only got 39 shoes?  Wouldn't you know it  It's the very pair  I wanted to wear.    5. Red shoes out of step in a busy street  Flowers in a field of continental quilt  Soon people stop to look or stare  After all, fashion is a serious affair  Two colors or more will make a flag  But only Red can stand out in a crowd  Without the media luna or a white star  These shoes are claiming freedom out loud. |

[**http://www.funnp.com/poetry/funny\_shoe\_poems.html**](http://www.funnp.com/poetry/funny_shoe_poems.html)

**Names of Horses**

All winter your brute shoulders strained against collars, padding  
and steerhide over the ash hames, to haul  
sledges of cordwood for drying through spring and summer,  
for the Glenwood stove next winter, and for the simmering range.

In April you pulled cartloads of manure to spread on the fields,  
dark manure of Holsteins, and knobs of your own clustered with oats.  
All summer you mowed the grass in meadow and hayfield, the mowing machine  
clacketing beside you, while the sun walked high in the morning;

and after noon’s heat, you pulled a clawed rake through the same acres,  
gathering stacks, and dragged the wagon from stack to stack,  
and the built hayrack back, uphill to the chaffy barn,  
three loads of hay a day from standing grass in the morning.

Sundays you trotted the two miles to church with the light load  
a leather quartertop buggy, and grazed in the sound of hymns.  
Generation on generation, your neck rubbed the windowsill  
of the stall, smoothing the wood as the sea smooths glass.

When you were old and lame, when your shoulders hurt bending to graze,  
one October the man, who fed you and kept you, and harnessed you every morning,  
led you through corn stubble to sandy ground above Eagle Pond,  
and dug a hole beside you where you stood shuddering in your skin,

and lay the shotgun’s muzzle in the boneless hollow behind your ear,  
and fired the slug into your brain, and felled you into your grave,  
shoveling sand to cover you, setting goldenrod upright above you,  
where by next summer a dent in the ground made your monument.

For a hundred and fifty years, in the Pasture of dead horses,  
roots of pine trees pushed through the pale curves of your ribs,  
yellow blossoms flourished above you in autumn, and in winter  
frost heaved your bones in the ground – old toilers, soil makers:

O Roger, Mackerel, Riley, Ned, Nellie, Chester, Lady Ghost.

--Donald Hall

**The Rural Carrier Stops to Kill a Nine-Foot Cottonmouth**

T.R. Hummer

Lord God, I saw the son-of-a-bitch uncoil

In the road ahead of me, uncoil and squirm

For the ditch, squirm a hell of a long time.

Missed him with the car. When I got back to him, he was all

But gone, nothing left on the road but the tip-end

Of his tail, and that disappearing into Johnson grass.

I leaned over the ditch and saw him, balled up now, hiss.

I aimed for the mouth and shot him. And shot him again.

Then I got a good strong stick and dragged him out.

He was long and evil, thick as the top of my arm.

There are things in this world a man can’t look at without

Wanting to kill. Don’t ask me why. I was calm

Enough, I thought. But I felt my spine

Squirm, suddenly. I admit it. It was mine.

**A Man**

Nina Cassian

Translated by Roy MacGregor-Hastie

While fighting for his country, he lost an arm

And was suddenly afraid:

“From now on, I shall only be able to do things by halves.

I shall reap half a harvest.

I shall be able to play either the tune

Or the accompaniment on the piano,

But never both parts together.

I shall be able to bang with only one fist

On doors, and worst of all

I shall only be able to half hold

my love close to me.

There will be things I cannot do at all,

Applaud for example,

At shows where everyone applauds.”

From that moment on, he set himself to do everything with twice as much enthusiasm.

And where the arm had been torn away a wing grew.

# Giraffes

  by [Kimiko Hahn](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/1536)   
After skimming the Sunday *Times*, Dad turned to the back of the magazine  
and tore out the crossword puzzle for his mother in Wisconsin—  
  
as routine as my calligraphy class on Saturdays, flute practice  
exactly twenty minutes on school nights  
  
and astringent twice daily. I loved the idea of puzzles   
but never tried my hand as problem-solving rubbed up against rivalry—  
  
red velvet cake, red velvet dress, trilling—  
  
because nothing was never enough and yet  
more than a small rectangular lawn and the pulsing marsh beyond.   
  
A puzzle might've been escape enough. A maze—instead of crossword?  
  
No, cross *words* were our puzzles, after all. Although my sister and I adored  
jigsaw pieces. Five-hundred. A zoo, I think. Giraffes, absolutely. -

# Recuerdo

  by [Edna St. Vincent Millay](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/160)

We were very tired, we were very merry—

We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—

But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,

We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;

And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.

We were very tired, we were very merry—

We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;

And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,

From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;

And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,

And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

We were very tired, we were very merry,

We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

We hailed "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,

And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;

And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,

And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

# Fifteen, Maybe Sixteen Things to Worry About

  by [Judith Viorst](http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/61)

My pants could maybe fall down when I dive off the diving board.

My nose could maybe keep growing and never quit.

Miss Brearly could ask me to spell words like *stomach* and *special*.

(*Stumick* and *speshul*?)

I could play tag all day and always be "it."

Jay Spievack, who's fourteen feet tall, could want to fight me.

My mom and my dad--like Ted's--could want a divorce.

Miss Brearly could ask me a question about Afghanistan.

(Who's Afghanistan?)

Somebody maybe could make me ride a horse.

My mother could maybe decide that I needed more liver.

My dad could decide that I needed less TV.

Miss Brearly could say that I have to write script and stop printing.

(I'm better at printing.)

Chris could decide to stop being friends with me.

The world could maybe come to an end on next Tuesday.

The ceiling could maybe come crashing on my head.

I maybe could run out of things for me to worry about.

And then I'd have to do my homework instead.