

Poetry Night
Home
Two River Theater

“Bleecker Street, Summer”

Derek Walcott: 1930-2017

St. Lucia

Summer for prose and lemons, for nakedness and languor,
for the eternal idleness of the imagined return,
for rare flutes and bare feet, and the August bedroom
of tangled sheets and the Sunday salt, ah violin!

When I press summer dusks together, it is
a month of street accordions and sprinklers
laying the dust, small shadows running from me.

It is music opening and closing, *Italia mia*, on Bleecker,
ciao, Antonio, and the water-cries of children
tearing the rose-coloured sky in streams of paper;
it is dusk in the nostrils and the smell of water
down littered streets that lead you to no water,
and gathering islands and lemons in the mind.

There is the Hudson, like the sea aflame.
I would undress you in the summer heat,
and laugh and dry your damp flesh if you came.

“Home”

Edgar Albert Guest: 1881-1959

United States

It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home,
A heap o' sun an' shadder, an' ye sometimes have t' roam
Afore ye really 'preciate the things ye lef' behind,
An' hunger fer 'em somehow, with 'em allus on yer mind.
It don't make any differunce how rich ye get t' be,
How much yer chairs an' tables cost, how great yer luxury;
It ain't home t' ye, though it be the palace of a king,
Until somehow yer soul is sort o' wrapped round everything.

Home ain't a place that gold can buy or get up in a minute;
Afore it's home there's got t' be a heap o' livin' in it;
Within the walls there's got t' be some babies born, and then
Right there ye've got t' bring 'em up t' women good, an' men;
And gradjerly as time goes on, ye find ye wouldn't part
With anything they ever used — they've grown into yer heart:
The old high chairs, the playthings, too, the little shoes they wore
Ye hoard; an' if ye could ye'd keep the thumb-marks on the door.

Ye've got t' weep t' make it home, ye've got t' sit an' sigh
An' watch beside a loved one's bed, an' know that Death is nigh;
An' in the stillness o' the night t' see Death's angel come,
An' close the eyes o' her that smiled, an' leave her sweet voice dumb.
Fer these are scenes that grip the heart, an' when yer tears are dried,
Ye find the home is dearer than it was, an' sanctified;
An' tuggin' at ye always are the pleasant memories
o' her that was an' is no more—ye can't escape from these.

Ye've got t' sing an' dance fer years, ye've got t' romp an' play,
An' learn t' love the things ye have by usin' 'em each day;
Even the roses 'round the porch must blossom year by year
Afore they 'come a part o' ye, suggestin' someone dear
Who used t' love 'em long ago, an' trained 'em jes t' run
The way they do, so's they would get the early mornin' sun;
Ye've got t' love each brick an' stone from cellar up t' dome:
It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home.

“Knoxville, Tennessee”
Nikki Giovanni: 1943-
United States

I always like summer
best
you can eat fresh corn
from daddy's garden
and okra
and greens
and cabbage
and lots of
barbecue
and buttermilk
and homemade ice-cream
at the church picnic
and listen to
gospel music
outside
at the church
homecoming
and go to the mountains with
your grandmother
and go barefooted
and be warm
all the time
not only when you go to bed
and sleep

“The House was Quiet and the World was Calm”

Wallace Stevens: 1879-1955

United States

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

“Homecoming”

Jay Wright: 1935-
United States

Guadalajara—New York, 1965

The trees are crystal chandeliers,
and deep in the hollow
a child pits its voice
against the rain.

The city screams its prayers
at the towers in the distance.

Those guitars again.
And the Catholic mantis
clutching at the sky,
a pearl of a city,
cuando se duerme.

Subway blue boys
now ride shotgun
against my freedom and my fears.
Pistols snap like indignant heels,
at midday, and we stand at the docks,
singing a farewell we'd soon forget.

Hymns resound against that dome
entre la fiesta y la agonía.
Worms feed on its concrete,
or we pluck them out of bodies.

But time to forget.
Or remember the easiness
of leaving easy loves,
disappearing
in the arms of secret dreams.

We'll sit at the end
of a banquet board,
and powder our tutored wigs,
flip the pages of gentility

in the rainy season.

English lessons over tea
for the price of memory.

Il mio supplizio
è quando
non mi credo
in armonia.

They say the time
is not much different.
The strange and customary turns
of living may coincide.

In Mariachi Plaza
travelers sing elegies to the beauty
of revolutions and tranquillity.

From the opposite side of the river,
coming in, the skyline seems scrubbed
and pointed ominously into the darkness.

I walk through the market,
kissing colors in a murmur
of self-induced petition.

Two spires,
lying against the night,
are suddenly armed to sail.

The water foams against the bottom,
the way it looked when I left
that dying city

Only a turning to feel the bark
slope off into the night,
with a promise to return.

Un di, s'io non andrò sempre fuggendo
di gente in gente, mi vedrai seduto

su la tua pietra, o fratel mio, gemendo
it fior dei tuoi gentili anni caduto.

From line to line,
from point to point,
is an architect's end of cities.

But I lie down
to a different turbulence
and a plan of transformation.

“Home Movies: A Sort of Ode”

Mary Jo Salter: 1954-

United States

Because it hadn't seemed enough,
after a while, to catalogue
more Christmases, the three-layer cakes
ablaze with birthday candles, the blizzard
Billy took a shovel to,
Phil's lawnmower tour of the yard,
the tree forts, the shoot-'em-ups
between the boys in new string ties
and cowboy hats and holsters,
or Mother sticking a bow as big
as Mouseketeer ears in my hair,

my father sometimes turned the gaze
of his camera to subjects more
artistic or universal:
long closeups of a rose's face;
a real-time sunset (nearly an hour);
what surely were some brilliant autumn
leaves before their colors faded
to dry beige on the aging film;
a great deal of pacing, at the zoo,
by polar bears and tigers caged,
he seemed to say, like him.

What happened between him and her
is another story. And just as well
we have no movie of it, only
some unforgiving scowls she gave
through terrifying, ticking silence
when he must have asked her (no
sound track) for a smile.
Still, what I keep yearning for
isn't those generic cherry
blossoms at their peak, or the brave
daffodil after a snowfall,

it's the re-run surprise

of the unshuttered, prefab blanks
of windows at the back of the house,
and how the lines of aluminum
siding are scribbled on with meaning
only for us who lived there;
it's the pair of elephant bookends
I'd forgotten, with the upraised trunks
like handles, and the books they meant
to carry in one block to a future
that scattered all of us.

And look: it's the stoneware mixing bowl
figured with hand-holding dancers
handed down so many years
ago to my own kitchen, still
valueless, unbroken. Here
she's happy, teaching us to dye
the Easter eggs in it, a Grecian
urn of sorts near which—a foster
child of silence and slow time
myself—I smile because she does
and patiently await my turn.

“Hokkaido”

Kit Fan:

Hong Kong

It was summer in Hokkaido.

The forest stole the wind
and I swallowed my footsteps.
Nobody came to the springs.
Butt naked I sat halfway
through my life measuring
this, that.

In Hokkaido it was summer.

Everything was halved or merged.
Half-cut fingers, half-foxgloves,
a marrowbone-cum-cabbage white.
The daylight moon, split.
I talked to nobody about
this, that.

Hokkaido in summer it was.

Ants were carrying a caterpillar
home. No bird arguing.
Nobody said missiles crossing
so I stayed. The night trees
stole the seas, canceling
this, that.

Zoom! (1987)
Simon Armitage 1963-
United Kingdom

It begins as a house, an end terrace
in this case

but it will not stop there. Soon it is
an avenue

which cambers arrogantly past the Mechanics' Institute,
turns left

at the main road without even looking
and quickly it is

a town with all four major clearing banks,
a daily paper
and a football team pushing for promotion.

On it goes, oblivious of the Planning Acts,
the green belts,

and before we know it it is out of our hands:
city, nation,

hemisphere, universe, hammering out in all directions
until suddenly,

mercifully, it is drawn aside through the eye
of a black hole

and bulleted into a neighbouring galaxy, emerging
smaller and smoother

than a billiard ball but weighing more than Saturn.

People stop me in the street, badger me
in the check-out queue

and ask "What is this, this that is so small
and so very smooth

but whose mass is greater than the ringed planet?"
It's just words

I assure them. But they will not have it.

BEDS: N 42° 44' 33" / E 84° 29' 47"

Divya Victor:

India/United States

We are on our knees. We are saying that the tulips have had it hard this week. We are saying something about the brightness & the dryness & we are saying we hope it will change. I press a finger into the loam, flick the dust on my jeans. We are listening to the snip of shears. I pick up a smooth, small disc of pink Sioux quartz, hold it like an avian heart in the palm. A disc slipped & beating from a time when all of North America was under sea. My finger walks the buttery vein that parses the stone in two & then in four. Its edges are under siege; its end at the foot of suburban perennials. Do you have stones, someone is asking me. Where you are from, do you have stones, like these. We have purple sunbirds, I am saying, & their hearts have four rooms, one for every answer to questions like these.

“Going Home: New Orleans” (2007)
Sheryl St. Germain: 1954-
United States

for my grandmother, Theresa Frank

Some slow evenings when the light hangs late and stubborn in the sky,
gives itself up to darkness slowly and deliberately, slow cloud after slow cloud,
slowness enters me like something familiar,
and it feels like going home.

It’s all there in the disappearing light:
all the evenings of slow sky and slow loving, slow boats on sluggish bayous;
the thick-middled trees with the slow-sounding names—oak, mimosa, pecan, magnolia;
the slow tree sap that sticks in your hair when you lie with the trees;
and the maple syrup and pancakes and grits, the butter melting
slowly into and down the sides like sweat between breasts of sloe-eyed strippers;
and the slow-throated blues that floats over the city like fog;
and the weeping, the willows, the cut onions, the cayenne, the slow-cooking beans with
marrow-thick gravy;
and all the mint juleps drunk so slowly on all the slow southern porches,
the bourbon and sugar and mint going down warm and brown, syrup and slow;
and all the ice cubes melting in all the iced teas,
all the slow-faced people sitting in all the slowly rocking rockers;
and the crabs and the shrimp and crawfish, the hard shells
slowly and deliberately and lovingly removed, the delicate flesh
slowly sucked out of heads and legs and tails;
and the slow lips that eat and drink and love and speak
that slow luxurious language, savoring each word like a long-missed lover;
and the slow-moving nuns, the black habits dragging the swollen ground;
and the slow river that cradles it all, and the chicory coffee
that cuts through it all, slow-boiled and black as dirt;
and the slow dreams and the slow-healing wounds and the slow smoke of it all
slipping out, ballooning into the sky—slow, deliberate, and magnificent.

“a party”

**John Brandi: 1943-
United States**

a party

where everyone says goodbye

then stays

“When de Co’n Pone’s Hot”

Paul Laurence Dunbar: 1872-1906

United States

Dey is times in life when Nature
Seems to slip a cog an' go,
Jes' a-rattlin' down creation,
Lak an ocean's overflow;
When de worl' jes' stahts a-spinnin'
Lak a picaninny's top,
An' yo' cup o' joy is brimmin'
'Twell it seems about to slop,
An' you feel jes' lak a racah,
Dat is trainin' fu' to trot—
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone's hot.

When you set down at de table,
Kin' o' weary lak an' sad,
An' you 'se jes' a little tiahed
An' purhaps a little mad;
How yo' gloom tu'ns into gladness,
How yo' joy drives out de doubt
When de oven do' is opened,
An' de smell comes po'in' out;
Why, de 'lectric light o' Heaven
Seems to settle on de spot,
When yo' mammy says de blessin'
An' de co'n pone's hot.

When de cabbage pot is steamin'
An' de bacon good an' fat,
When de chittlins is a-sputter'n'
So's to show you whah dey's at;
Tek away yo' sody biscuit,
Tek away yo' cake an' pie,
Fu' de glory time is comin',
An' it's 'proachin' mighty nigh,
An' you want to jump an' hollah,
Dough you know you'd bettah not,
When yo' mammy says de blessin'

An' de co'n pone's hot.

I have hyeahd a' lots o' sermons,
An' I've hyeahd o' lots o' prayers,
An I've listened to some singin'
Dat has tuck me up de stairs
Of de Glory-Lan' an' set me
Jes' below de Mastah's th'one,
An' have lef' my hea't a-singin'
In a happy aftah tone;
But dem wu'ds so sweetly murmured
Seem to tech de softes' spot,
When my mammy says de blessin',
An' de co'n pone's hot.

“Bees Were Better”

**Naomi Shihab Nye: 1952-
United States**

In college, people were always breaking up.
We broke up in parking lots,
beside fountains.
Two people broke up
across a table from me
at the library.
I could not sit at that table again
though I did not know them.
I studied bees, who were able
to convey messages through dancing
and could find their ways
home to their hives
even if someone put up a blockade of sheets
and boards and wire.
Bees had radar in their wings and brains
that humans could barely understand.
I wrote a paper proclaiming
their brilliance and superiority
and revised it at a small café
featuring wooden hive-shaped honey-dippers
in silver honeypots
at every table.

“Deep in our Refrigerator” (2000)
Jack Prelutsky: 1940-
United States

Deep in our refrigerator,
there's a special place
for food that's been around awhile . . .
we keep it, just in case.
“It's probably too old to eat,”
my mother likes to say.
“But I don't think it's old enough
for me to throw away.”

It stays there for a month or more
to ripen in the cold,
and soon we notice fuzzy clumps
of multicolored mold.
The clumps are larger every day,
we notice this as well,
but mostly what we notice
is a certain special smell.

When finally it all becomes
a nasty mass of slime,
my mother takes it out, and says,
“Apparently, it's time.”
She dumps it in the garbage can,
though not without regret,
then fills the space with other food
that's not so ancient yet

“House: Some Instructions” (1999)
Grace Paley: 1922-2007
United States

If you have a house
you must think about it all the time
as you reside in the house so
it must be a home in your mind

you must ask yourself (wherever you are)
have I closed the front door

and the back door is often forgotten
not against thieves necessarily

but the wind oh if it blows
either door open then the heat

the heat you’ve carefully nurtured
with layers of dry hardwood

and a couple of opposing green
brought in to slow the fire

as well as the little pilot light
in the convenient gas backup

all of that care will be mocked because
you have not kept the house on your mind

but these may actually be among
the smallest concerns for instance

the house could be settling you may
notice the thin slanting line of light

above the doors you have to think about that
luckily you have been paying attention

the house’s dryness can be humidified
with vaporizers in each room and pots

of water on the woodstove should you leave
for the movies after dinner ask yourself

have I turned down the thermometer
and moved all wood paper away from the stove

the fiery result of excited distraction
could be too horrible to describe

now we should talk especially to Northerners
of the freezing of the pipe this can often

be prevented by pumping water continuously
through the baseboard heating system

allowing the faucet to drip drip continuously
day and night you must think about the drains

separately in fact you should have established
their essential contribution to the ordinary

kitchen and toilet life of the house
digging these drains deep into warm earth

if it hasn't snowed by mid-December you
must cover them with hay sometimes rugs

and blankets have been used do not be
troubled by their monetary value

as this is a regionally appreciated emergency
you may tell your friends to consider

your house as their own that is
if they do not wear outdoor shoes

when thumping across the gleam of their poly-
urethaned floors they must bring socks or slippers

to your house as well you must think

of your house when you're in it and

when you're visiting the superior cabinets
and closets of others when you approach

your house in the late afternoon
in any weather green or white you will catch

sight first of its new aluminum snow-resistant
roof and the reflections in the cracked windows

its need in the last twenty-five years for paint
which has created a lovely design

in russet pink and brown the colors of un-
intentioned neglect you must admire the way it does not

(because of someone's excellent decision
sixty years ago) stand on the high ridge deforming

the green profile of the hill but rests in the modesty
of late middle age under the brow of the hill with

its back to the dark hemlock forest looking steadily
out for miles toward the cloud refiguring meadows and

mountains of the next state coming up the road
by foot or auto the house can be addressed personally

House! in the excitement of work and travel to
other people's houses with their interesting improvements

we thought of you often and spoke of your coziness
in winter your courage in wind and fire your small

airy rooms in humid summer how you nestle in spring
into the leaves and flowers of the hawthorn and the sage green

leaves of the Russian olive tree House! you were not forgotten

“Housekeeping” (2000)

**Natasha Trethewey: 1966-
United States**

We mourn the broken things, chair legs
wrenched from their seats, chipped plates,
the threadbare clothes. We work the magic
of glue, drive the nails, mend the holes.
We save what we can, melt small pieces
of soap, gather fallen pecans, keep neck bones
for soup. Beating rugs against the house,
we watch dust, lit like stars, spreading
across the yard. Late afternoon, we draw
the blinds to cool the rooms, drive the bugs
out. My mother irons, singing, lost in reverie.
I mark the pages of a mail-order catalog,
listen for passing cars. All day we watch
for the mail, some news from a distant place.

“Houseplants in Winter” (1986)

**Eamon Grennan: 1941-
Ireland**

Their survival seems an open question:
I make a mess of watering, prune
without discretion, grieve over the leaf
whose borders burn and curl. Their
fresh petals a perpetual surprise –
minute coral hearts, magnesium stars.

I've lined them up on the table
I work and eat at, facing the small window
that faces almost south, placing myself
under the pale sway of their silence.
They play their deaths and resurrections out
in our cramped common quarters.

I gave the rose-geranium too much water:
its roots grew bog-black, sodden, and
nothing could keep its sweetness
in our lives. The jade, for all its
early promise and parakeet-green shoots,
won't root: it bows its leathery heads.

The rest seem busy getting by. Removed
to the margins of our noisy mealtimes
when my children visit, they grow used
to the smell of bread frying in goosefat
for breakfast, small talk, the after-
dinner pungency of a peeled tangerine.

The speechless life they lead is Greek
to me: when live flowers rise
out of dead heads, I reckon it's as much,
for the moment, as I need to know.
The light that falls on them
strikes me too, till I feel as rooted

as I'll ever be in this home
from home. Look at us, they seem to say,

flourishing under straitened circumstances:
you see we make do with your handfuls
of earth, your cups of water, these daily
visitations of winter light that cast our
impeccable shadows on your razed page.

“We House” (2015)
Britteny Black Rose Kapri
United States

After Krista Franklin's definition of funk

House, as in abode, as in dwelling, as in crib, as in where your inhibitions go to rest. as in jack, loft, footwork. as in sweating out that press and curl. as in yo momma steppin out tonight. as in yo daddy put on his good shoes. as in this movement gradually getting Bigger Thomas. as in Pump Up the Volume. House as in bull pen. as in Detroit stay trying to claim our shit. as in we pledge allegiance to House Nation. as in The Warehouse. as in Professor Funk in full regalia. as in Chris Underwood on the 1s and 2s. as in The Chosen Few. as in Jackson Park. as in Black kids reading poems at The HotHouse. as in Hands Off Assata. as in shutdown. as in too many educated Black people downtown. as in “shiiid, we still got The Silver Room.” as in the Godfather himself teaching you how to pray with a beat. as in Rest in Rhythm Frankie Knuckles. as in a sea of Black bodies. as in Black bodies draped across poplar trees.

as in Black boys crumbling beneath white hands. as in we’ll never forget you Eugene Williams. as in a city of Fire. again. as in “Can You Feel It.” as in Stockyards. as in Hog Butcher of the World. as in butchered Black boys. as in Mamie Till calling for an open casket. House as in a Harold Washington. as in finally for the people. as in “ha y’all niggas thought you had something.” as in our skin is not for mourning. as in drum beats. as in we still don’t need to know the same language to speak. House as in fusion. as in niggas spent they whole time in this country making the best outta scraps. as in Shack comma Harold’s Chicken. as in free breakfast. as in Black Panther. as in lit candles and airbrushed RIP T-shirts for that kid down the way. and that other kid. and that other kid. as in yo grandma’s cooking on a Sunday after church. as in every week you live Black you’re served a last supper. as in yo cousin doing hair in the kitchen. as in a fan in the window cause “you bet not turn that AC on.” as in Your Love. as in Chicago is my kind of town, unless I can see the niggas. as in white flight. as in redlining. as in naming the train that separates us the Red Line. as in “y’all ain’t even trying to hide that shit no mo.” as in we ain’t going no where. as in we gone dance anyway. as in home is where the House plays.

“Mothers” (1972)

**Nikki Giovanni:1943-
United States**

the last time i was home
to see my mother we kissed
exchanged pleasantries
and unpleasantries pulled a warm
comforting silence around
us and read separate books

i remember the first time
i consciously saw her
we were living in a three room
apartment on burns avenue

mommy always sat in the dark
i don't know how i knew that but she did

that night i stumbled into the kitchen
maybe because i've always been
a night person or perhaps because i had wet
the bed
she was sitting on a chair
the room was bathed in moonlight diffused through
those thousands of panes landlords who rented
to people with children were prone to put in windows
she may have been smoking but maybe not
her hair was three-quarters her height
which made me a strong believer in the samson myth
and very black

i'm sure i just hung there by the door
i remember thinking: what a beautiful lady

she was very deliberately waiting
perhaps for my father to come home
from his night job or maybe for a dream
that had promised to come by
“come here” she said “i'll teach you
a poem: *i see the moon*

*the moon sees me
god bless the moon
and god bless me”*

i taught it to my son
who recited it for her
just to say we must learn
to bear the pleasures
as we have borne the pains

“kitchenette building”

Gwendolyn Brooks: 1917-2000

United States

We are things of dry hours and the involuntary plan,
Grayed in, and gray. “Dream” makes a giddy sound, not strong
Like “rent,” “feeding a wife,” “satisfying a man.”

But could a dream send up through onion fumes
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,
Anticipate a message, let it begin?

We wonder. But not well! not for a minute!
Since Number Five is out of the bathroom now,
We think of lukewarm water, hope to get in it.

“Home And Love”

Robert William Service: 1874-1958

United Kingdom

Just Home and Love! the words are small
Four little letters unto each;
And yet you will not find in all
The wide and gracious range of speech
Two more so tenderly complete:
When angels talk in Heaven above,
I'm sure they have no words more sweet
Than Home and Love.

Just Home and Love! it's hard to guess
Which of the two were best to gain;
Home without Love is bitterness;
Love without Home is often pain.
No! each alone will seldom do;
Somehow they travel hand and glove:
If you win one you must have two,
Both Home and Love.

And if you've both, well then I'm sure
You ought to sing the whole day long;
It doesn't matter if you're poor
With these to make divine your song.
And so I praisefully repeat,
When angels talk in Heaven above,
There are no words more simply sweet
Than Home and Love.

“Upon Feeling Homesick”

Janice Flynn

United States

In my home town stuck
in a traffic jam on Pulaski Road
I suddenly feel homesick.
For a year I stayed away
and didn't think of this road once.
Though when I'm stressed
my dreams always bring me back
to Chicago's streets.
Now I'm actually here waiting
for the traffic to move watching
the ComEd workmen lay cords
below the street at 57th.
Unfashionable people wait for buses
and cross the street. Polish delis
nestled next to Mexican taquerias.
A squad car zooms past, an ambulance
and fire engine follow. Gang warfare marks
the garages with graffiti:
the Latin Kings' high art.
A train passes with cars
filled with things going elsewhere
its steady clank, clank and horn warning
at the intersection. Midway's planes
rock to their descent at 75th
barely five hundred feet above us.
To miss something
is to love it still. So many come
from so far away and I have the nerve
to forsake it. This city will not free me easily.
I relent so it may let me go.