

Poetry Set – Friendship and Loneliness

“Alone”- Maya Angelou, 1928 - 2014

Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And bread loaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

There are some millionaires
With money they can't use
Their wives run round like banshees
Their children sing the blues
They've got expensive doctors
To cure their hearts of stone.
But nobody
No, nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Now if you listen closely
I'll tell you what I know
Storm clouds are gathering
The wind is gonna blow
The race of man is suffering
And I can hear the moan,
'Cause nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.

Alone, all alone
Nobody, but nobody
Can make it out here alone.

“His Morning Meditations” - Jay Parini, 1948

My father in this lonely room of prayer
listens at the window
in the little house of his own dreams.
He has come a long way just to listen,
over seas and sorrow, through the narrow gate
of his deliverance.
And he dwells here now,
beyond the valley and the shadow, too,
in silence mustered day by dawn.
It has come to this sweet isolation
in the eye of God, the earliest of mornings
in his chambered skull, this frost of thought.

“One Way or Another” - Naomi Shihab Nye, 1952

She is gone, where did she go?
He can't imagine how the house will feel
when he enters it, moving room to room.
Now that the wait is over, a larger pause
will blanket the roof, softness settling
slowly down. By which window or door
may future days enter? And what about minor
questions called out, to which there was always
that lilting reply?

“A Walk through the Cemetery” - Gary Soto, 1952

In memory of David Ruenzel, 1954–2014

I searched for twenty minutes
For my murdered friend's grave,
A small, white marker,
356 it reads. He is not
This number, or any number,
And he is not earth,
But a memory
Of how he and I hiked
Through this Oakland cemetery—
What, six months before
He was shot? We stopped
At the Fred Korematsu stone,
Righteous man, stubborn
Behind bars for refusing
The Japanese-American internment in 1942—
Jail for him, in suit and tie, god dammit.
We righted flowers at his grave,
Bright with toy-like American flags,
And shaded our eyes to follow
The flight of the hawks above.
We left and walked up a slope
And visited a part of the cemetery
Where the Chinese are buried,
A division of races, a preference?

Now I'm at his grave marker—
The stone for him has yet to arrive.
His widow lives a mile up
In the Oakland Hills.
Here is truth: she has a telescope
Trained on his grave.
She pours coffee—she looks.
She does the vacuuming—she looks.
She comes home hugging bags
Of groceries—she looks.
Perhaps she is getting up
From the piano, an eye wincing
Behind the telescope.
If so, she would see me
Looking at marker #366—
This plot is available,
Purchasable, ready
For a down payment.
But the first installment
I must pay with my life.
What then? His widow
Will still keep the telescope
Trained on his grave,
Now and then swiveling
It to #366, his friend.
The buzzing bees would languidly
Pass the honey between us.

“Elegy for a Dead Labrador” - Lars

Gustafsson, 1936 – 2016

Here there may be, in the midst of summer,
a few days when suddenly it's fall.
Thrushes sing on a sharper note.
The rocks stand determined out in the water.
They know something. They've always known it.
We know it too, and we don't like it.
On the way home, in the boat, on just such evenings
you would stand stock-still in the bow, collected,
scouting the scents coming across the water.
You read the evening, the faint streak of smoke
from a garden, a pancake frying
half a mile away, a badger
standing somewhere in the same twilight
sniffing the same way. Our friendship
was of course a compromise; we lived
together in two different worlds: mine,
mostly letters, a text passing through life,
yours, mostly smells. You had knowledge
I would have given much to have possessed:
the ability to let a feeling—eagerness, hate, or love—
run like a wave throughout your body
from nose to tip of tail, the inability
ever to accept the moon as fact.
At the full moon you always complained loudly against it.
You were a better Gnostic than I am. And consequently
you lived continually in paradise.
You had a habit of catching butterflies on the leap,
and munching them, which some people thought disgusting.
I always liked it. Why
couldn't I learn from you? And doors.
In front of closed doors you lay down and slept
sure that sooner or later the one would come
who'd open up the door. You were right.
I was wrong. Now I ask myself, now this
long mute friendship is forever finished,
if possibly there was anything I could do
which impressed you. Your firm conviction
that I called up the thunderstorms
doesn't count. That was a mistake. I think
my certain faith that the ball existed,
even when hidden behind the couch,
somehow gave you an inkling of my world.
In my world most things were hidden
behind something else. I called you “dog,”
I really wonder whether you perceived me
as a larger, noisier “dog”
or as something different, forever unknown,
which is what it is, existing in that attribute
it exists in, a whistle
through the nocturnal park one has got used to
returning to without actually knowing
what it is one is returning to. About you,
and who you were, I knew no more.
One might say, from this more objective
standpoint, we were two organisms. Two
of those places where the universe makes a knot
in itself, short-lived, complex structures
of proteins that have to complicate themselves
more and more in order to survive, until everything
breaks and turns simple once again, the knot
dissolved, the riddle gone. You were a question
asked of another question, nothing more,
and neither had the answer to the other.