



Florida State University

ARF News Special Feature

Poetry Remembered 2013



Poetry Remembered

by Fred Standley

With thanks to Tom Hart as Editor of the Retiree Journal for his enthusiastic support this issue initiates a new feature which will be continued if it is appreciated by ARF members. Namely, each month this new section with the above title will appear and will feature a poem that has been selected by an ARF member along with a brief two or three sentences explaining the reason for the choice. I am pleased to say that Tom has provided the poem for this our first inclusion of this new feature. He has selected "I Still Rise" by Maya Angelou.



Maya Angelou is a celebrated poet, novelist, memoirist, dramatist, actress, filmmaker, and civil rights activist. She is indeed a Renaissance woman. Her novel "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (1970) has received international acclaim. At his request she composed the poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" and read it at the inauguration of President Clinton. She has received over 50 honorary degrees and is currently the Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University.

Tom's rationale for his selection:

"I was fortunate to hear Maya Angelou speak at a School Librarian's Conference in Atlanta in the 1980's. I never really like poetry until then. Even when she speaks, there is a rhythm to her voice that is soothing. She has faced incredible obstacles in her life, but still perseveres. I guess that's when I became hooked on 'special' poems with deep meaning and feeling."

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?
Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard 'Cause I laugh like
I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air,
I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise

Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling
I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors
gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Poetry Remembered: Marilyn Young's Choice

by Fred Standley

In this issue we continue the column begun in the Fall Journal with another selection of a favorite poem by a member of ARF. Marilyn Young shares her admiration for the work of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Ms. Akhmatova was born in Odessa in 1889 and died in Moscow in 1966, thus living through three of the four great upheavals in Russia: the Revolution, WWI and WWII. Her works were often condemned and censored during the Stalinist era, and she was thus in official disfavor. Her first husband was executed by the secret police, and her son and second husband spent many years in the Gulag.

Marilyn's rationale for her selection:

"Anna Akhmatova is my favorite poet, but it is difficult to choose a favorite poem of hers. I like her because her work is so evocative of the times she was part of and observed. She chose to stay in Russia throughout her life and was persecuted for her writing. Two of her best known works are 'Lot's Wife' and 'Poem Without a Hero,' which was written in part during the siege of Leningrad. I chose the poem 'July 1914,' because it seems to presage not only the Revolution (already in process) and the First World War but also the dark days of Stalinism and World War II as well."

July 1914

1

All month a smell of burning, of dry peat smoldering in the bogs.

Even the birds have stopped singing,
the aspen does not tremble.

The God of wrath glares in the sky,
the fields have been parched since Easter. A one-legged pilgrim stood in the yard with his mouth full of prophecies:

“Beware of terrible times...the earth opening for a crowd of corpses. Expect famine, earthquakes, plagues, and heavens darkened eclipses.

“But our land will not be divided
by the enemy at his pleasure:
the Mother-of-God will spread
a white shroud over those great sorrows.”

2

From the burning woods drifts
the sweet smell of juniper.
Widows grieve over their brood,
the village rings with their lamentation.
If the land thirsted, it was not in vain, nor were the prayers wasted.
For a warm red rain soaks
the trampled fields.

Low, low hangs the empty sky, tender is the voice
of the supplicant:

“They wound Thy most holy body, They are casting lots for Thy garments.”

And, Marilyn summarizes her work as “the voice of a nation and a people” as illustrated in this lyric.

Requiem

1935-1940

No foreign sky protected me,
No stranger’s wing shielded my face. I
stand as witness to the common lot, Survivor
of that time, that place..

Poetry Remembered: Bob Spivey’s Choice

by Fred Standley

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), a late Victorian poet, was born into a devout Anglican family and showed early promise as a writer, having won a prize for a poem in the first school he attended. Later, while a student in Balliol College at Oxford he continued to write and also developed significant friendships, including that with Robert Bridges (poet laureate 1913-1930) who published the first volume of poems by Hopkins after the latter’s death. While at Oxford Hopkins converted to Roman Catholicism and ultimately became a Jesuit priest. Bob Spivey is our guest for this issue and provided the following comments for his selection.

My favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, was first encountered during a 1950’s under-graduate course in Victorian Literature and recently was read as an inspiring moment for a fall 2012 ARF Luncheon. Hopkins is remarkable in his poetic use of words: quick, fresh,

evocative, soaring, plumbing, searing. Hopkins reminds me of a contemporary wordsmith, Robert MacNeill of the MacNeill/Lehrer NewsHour who has written: ‘Wordstruck is exactly what I was—and still am: crazy about the sounds of words, the look of words, the taste of words, the feeling for words on the tongue and in the mind.’ “ (WORDSTRUCK: A MEMOIR)

“Please read aloud and listen to two of his best known poems, each reflecting the motto of his Jesuit order, viz. ‘To the greater glory of God.’ “

God’s Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell; the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
wings.

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, an

Poetry Remembered:

**Tonya Harris, Jenna Hurst &
Max Carraway**

One of my favorite poems is by Maya Angelou, I know *Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

I asked my granddaughter, Jenna Hurst, to do some background for this article. She informed me,

“In the poem, *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Maya Angelou illustrates her resilience to preserve in the face of adversity. Growing up in Stamps, Arkansas, Angelou discovered the hardships of living in a world where the color of one’s skin determined their social status. While Angelou often struggled with prejudice due to her skin color, she had other personal issues as well. At the age of eight, Angelou was victimized by her mother’s boyfriend shattering her youthful innocence. For several years, Angelou refused to speak, convinced that her own words had the power to bring death upon others. Becoming a shell of her former self, Angelou lost the joy she once found in education and her relationship with her brother began to waken. Fortunately, she was able to rediscover her joy when she gave birth to her son.

Personally, I admire her and her will to overcome the various adversities she faced during her lifetime. She is an inspiring author and icon to today’s future “leaders of America”. I believe that her works are universal and can apply to everyone; we have all faced difficult challenges at one point in our lives, and her story is a clear example that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.”

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tired
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a tearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou was born April 4, 1928 and passed away on May 28, 2014. She was an American author, poet, dancer, actress and singer. She was awarded over 50 honorary degrees and received numerous awards.

As Tonya Harris relates, “This poem and the story that it inhabits is a reminder of the persistent dream of freedom, dignity, and equality. No matter the circumstances, no matter the plight, the journey continues and has no end. One may give out, but never gives up. It’s a matter of keeping on and moving forward, in honor of ourselves and our ancestors.

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Former U.S. Poet Laureate and author James Dickey wrote in the "Atlantic Monthly" in 1968 that Roethke was "in my opinion the greatest poet this country has yet produced." He published numerous volumes and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1954 for his work *THE WAKING*; additionally he won two National Book Awards for other volumes.

While a graduate student at Northwestern University it was my privilege to attend a three-day seminar featuring the linguist Seshawa Hayakawa, the philosopher William Barrett, and poet Roethke. To say that I succumbed to his poetic presence and influence doesn't quite do justice to the continuing inspiration I discover in his lines. For a number of years my favorite poem was Tennyson's "Ulysses" and its gripping lines:

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not yield.

Then, began my acquaintance with Roethke began, and especially the signature poem "The Waking" in his prize winning volume, and I was hooked.

By using a series of paradoxes to lay bare the essentials of his introspective vision of life as a complex struggle of the inner and outer worlds that each of us experiences and through numerous metaphors drawn from physical nature, he accomplishes and gives to his expression what Dickey calls a "deep, gut vitality."

The Waking (1953)

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow,
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear,
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me; so take the lively air,
And lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

Roethke was teaching at the University of Washington when he died of a heart attack. In 1995 the city of Seattle renamed a street in his honor as Roethke Mews; on it was the Blue Moon Tavern, one of his favorite places.

In 2012 the United State Postal Service featured him on a postage stamp as one of the ten great American poets in the twentieth century.