

Hello friends! Welcome to the April 30th Poetry Readers discussion - so excited to bring back this little tradition! In case you're new here, or if you need a reminder, these discussions are typically monthly, and we get together to discuss one poem (from a YWser or a famous poet) amongst ourselves.

For this month's discussion: participants can bring **any poem** they wish (original poetry, famous poetry from online sources, another person's with permission) and optionally offer some questions for discussion! Please remember to add content warnings as needed, and always be sure to disclose where you found your poem / who wrote it - integrity is key!

Sign-in (username / nickname):

inksthewriter / inks

thehoplessromantic / hop

spottedpebble / pebble

Liminality/ Lim

alliyah

General Discussion Questions (copy-paste if you want!):

- What images stand out most, and why do they feel important?
- Does the form reflect or reinforce the poem's meaning? How is the poem structured?
- How might different readers interpret the poem differently? What central themes or ideas is the poem exploring?
- If you could ask the poet one question, what would it be?

^ answers don't have to be long - write as much as you want, or engage with others' thoughts if you don't feel like writing your own!

Billy Collins - LINES COMPOSED THREE THOUSAND MILES AWAY FROM TINTERN ABBEY

I was here before, a long time ago,
and now I am here again
is an observation that occurs in poetry
as frequently as rain occurs in life.

The fellow may be gazing
over an English landscape,
hillsides dotted with sheep,
a row of tall trees topping the downs,

or he could be moping through the shadows
of a dark Bavarian forest,
a wedge of cheese and a volume of fairy tales
tucked into his rucksack.

But the feeling is always the same.
It was better the first time.
This time is not nearly as good.
I'm not feeling as well as I did back then.

Something is always missing—
swans, a glint on the surface of a lake,
some minor but essential touch,
or the quality of things has diminished.

The sky was a deeper, more dimensional blue,
clouds were more cathedral-like,
and water rushed
with greater effervescence over rock.

We have watched it all from our chairs,
the poor author in his waistcoat
recalling the dizzying icebergs of childhood
as he mills around in a field of weeds.

Questions to Consider:

- How does the poem treat the idea of returning to a place after a long time?
- Is the speaker criticizing nostalgia, sympathizing with it, or both?
- In what ways does the poem depend on knowing earlier Romantic poetry, especially Wordsworth?
- Where do you see irony in the poem, and what does it contribute to your reading?

Lim: I really like this poem! It kind of reminds me of the other one Billy Collins wrote about 'torturing a poem for meaning'. As for the first question, I think there's a sense of anti-climax <- really good point lim! It's not so much "narrative" and yet it does feel like time is passing in how Collins portrays the return to a place. "as frequently as rain occurs in life" deliberately compares it to something really mundane and natural. It's mundane and the mundane is disappointing if you're expecting something sublime and transcendent every time - something "cathedral-like" in the clouds. The title is an allusion to a famous Wordsworth poem that I've often seen cited in 'poems about a place'. I'm sure I must've read it at some point but I really don't remember much of it >.< The image of "the fellow . . .gazing over an English landscape" and "the poor author in his waistcoat" definitely makes me think of the perspectives taken in Romantic poems though, like the individual masculine figure trying to transcend reality by gazing at 'nature' little thoreau feeling... - but they parody those perspectives and critique them. The line "We have watched it all from our chairs" seems to align the poem's perspective with that of a critical reader rather than "the poor author" himself, so it feels like the poem ends with criticising nostalgia, though it may seem to sympathise with it in earlier stanzas.

I really love your analysis Lim. <3!

(I hadn't thought of specifically Romantic perspectives on masculinity, but I really do see that now -> such an interesting lens to view some lines through, like how we internalize what a poet even is... why a man? probably lies deeper with some of the irony.)(Yeah for sure)

(I like the idea you pointed out with the poem having a sort of anticlimax in it. It describes the first vision of a place as something lovely, but the return the poem focuses on is mostly something disappointing. And what you said about the line "We have watched it all from our chairs" makes me think of the phrase *window sitter*. (I swear when I first looked up this phrase months ago that it was described as something like 'one who watches the world through their window but does not take part in it,' but now all the internet is giving me is something done in Japan to make workers want to quit @-@ . Now I'm wondering where I got that first definition from because I definitely remember reading that in multiple places.)) (Oh that's an interesting phrase! Yeah it definitely feels important somehow that Collins includes "from our chairs", in contrast to the writer being in the forest or on the hill.)

chi: I like how Collins plays around with the idea that you can almost reinvent certain cliches by simply

continuing to write them and producing organic thoughts with them -> "I was here before ... now I am here again" and such. it reduces something traditionally kind of "deep" into just another ordinary moment, poetry or not. with that, I do think he both criticizes and sympathizes with nostalgia;<- yeah! it's like he reels us in so WE as the reader start to feel nostalgic then says "wait... not so fast" - tho there is not so much a climax of events, there is a climax of revelation for the final stanza that here's the poet... and here (you) are the reader of this state of affairs... one hand, he mocks the tendency to believe everything was "better" before (skies, clouds, landscapes, etc.), but I do think there is inherently sadness in that realization - outside circumstances tend to diminish our memories / thoughts on certain things, like youth being a main one here. cliches, while a bit self-indulgent, are just natural aspects of being a poet, whatever that means, especially a younger / newer poet. the poem also def depends on earlier poetry, like Wordsworth wrote a lot about nature and childhood and so on. instead of following suit with the whole Romantic imagining of the poet as some sublime, spiritually elevated (almost kind of divine in some way, if you really lean into it) figure, I like how Collins reforms what a poet is into just... a regular person. some guy in a forest with cheese and a book, or some person walking around aimlessly in the weeds. lots of irony in that contrast between grander, mythic ideals of writers and feelings with the deflating nature of the poem - I think it generally works? nostalgia, looking back, is somewhat ridiculous anyway. "oh, why did I even care so much back then?" "why did I write that poem?" it tends itself to that kind of feeling, which is human (and beautiful because it is so human). mhmm!

(Oh I like your phrasing on the poet being reconstructed as a "regular person" and that the poem is "deflating".)

(I didn't think about the poem as trying to subvert and make fun of ideas of nostalgia and cliches in poetry, but reading through it again I can definitely see it. I like what you said about nostalgia—that it is quite silly, but ultimately something very human, and that humanness is what makes it appeal so much in poetry.)

pebble: The idea presented by the poem that places are most beautiful the first time you see them is a sad one, and yet the tone of the poem does not feel quite so sad to me. I think it's more reminiscent about the beauty of those places upon first experience with them, and the nostalgia the poem presents seems a bit more resigned to its fate, but in a contemplative way instead of a hopeless way. However, in the first stanza of the poem, where Collins writes how the observation that "I was here before, a long time ago, / and now I am here again" occurs very often in poetry and compares the frequency of this feeling in poetry to the frequency of a rainy day. The symbolism of rain is typically associated with sadness and hopelessness, yet the descriptive imagery of the beauty of these places later in the poem (especially with "The sky was a deeper, more dimensional blue, / clouds were more cathedral-like, / and water rushed / with greater effervescence over rock.") is more reflective in a way that reads as a bit happier, kind of like smiling when looking back on the memory of that first joyous experience.

(Yeah I agree that the tone doesn't go towards despair even though it's sort of about the topic of disappointment or things 'diminishing' in quality!)

(^ agree with that. I also like how you explore the rain more in depth - def a "cliche" image that's constantly fallen back on, and it really shows how Collins intended to subvert some expectations.)

alliyah: love the sense of time passing and how time passing gives you new / different perspective through repetition and life's gaze - the rain continues to be old and new. feels as pebble points out very "reminiscent" and pokes fun a little bit at the author that dissects meaning out of a "poetified" past. while walking around what they believe now are just weeds.... poetry / writing like time also changes our perspective as we try to find meaning in the very ordinary.

the third stanza makes me giggle - it feels like a very purposeful sort of mock / poking fun of broody poems / people - with the "wedge of cheese"

The Song of the Wandering Aengus — William Butler Yeats

(online source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55687/the-song-of-wandering-aengus>)

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

chi: Yeats is awesome! my favourite aspect of this poem is its repetition of 'hazel' throughout - I know in Celtic mythology, hazel is quite significant... I think representing something to do with wisdom? I also imagine the 'fire' correlates to some kind of poetic inspiration, maybe romantic love / longing in a sense, but I think that also falls under the "poetic inspiration" umbrella -> it is this force that drives one out of an ordinary life and into the magical reality the rest of the poem encompasses. some kind of inspiration or desire before it had found its "object" / muse. I could also see that same muse being the later 'glimmering girl' that co-exists as both a figure of idealized beauty and happiness (she gives life meaning), mhmm! good point that maybe the fairy girl is more of a metaphor personification of "something" (maybe purpose / wonder itself) but also something of a temptation for that same meaning... she pulls the narrator into endless wandering. is love, or passion, or inspiration enough to completely reroute your life? maybe, in a way - once you know it deeply, you can't ever go back to living an ordinary life in the same way you did before (hence the wandering around, I think) mhmm they don't seem fully satisfied in the end, because they continue their search even as they continue to meet her. even if you inevitably move on, gain new hobbies or find new loves or write new things and so on, you will always carry parts of it within you, proof that you did have it once. like "I am old with wandering ... I will find out where she has gone ..." it sticks with you.

"i am old with wandering" is such a great turn of phrase!

Lim: The narrative and imagery in this poem strikes me as being whimsical. I had to google the word "Aengus" but I can definitely see the speaker of this poem as being compared to (or straight up portrayed

as) a god of youth and love. The idea of transformations also strikes me - the use of the "moth" imagery makes me think of something quick and fleeting, but maybe also something that can metamorphosise. The way the lines are phrased ("I dropped the berry in a stream/ And caught a little silver trout") also makes it seem like the berry transformed into the trout or was exchanged for the trout, and then of course the trout transforms into a girl who then runs away. In the last stanza it seems to show the god of youth has wandered so long looking for her that they've grown old, which seems to be hyperbolic in a way. I feel like the poem could read as being about wandering itself, just the endless search for *something*.

alliyah - So the speaker seems to long for something to satisfy / put out the fire in their head - they look in the forrest and see many beautiful things, and then someone calls THEIR name and that captures them - but they ran " through the air" which I'm thinking means they lost her... and now the subject continues to look for her and "find out where she has gone" - I don't know if she is passed now or gone but it seems he still has her when he sees the moon and the sun - maybe he sees her in the heavens. Definitely a sense of whimsy and longing and I'm not sure "love" is quite the word but someone who is "enchanted"... <- for sure, I wonder if she was meant to be more supernatural in a way? whimsy is a great way to put it the whole poem feels very other worldly except the "name" part and then being old and wandering - those two parts feel rooted in reality the rest is very dream-like.

cw: death!

poem - (Obit by Victoria Chang) source:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/147140/obit>

Caretakers — died in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, one after another. One didn't show up because her husband was in prison. Most others watched the clock. Time breaks for the living eventually and they can walk out of doors. The handle of time's door is hot for the dying. What use is a door if you can't exit? A door that can't be opened is called a wall. My father is on the other side of the wall. Tomatoes are ripening on the other side. I can see them through the window that also can't be opened. A window that can't be opened is just a see-through wall. Sometimes we're on the inside like a plane. Most of the time, we're on the outside like doggie day care. I don't know if the tomatoes are the new form of his language or if they're simply for eating. I can't ask him because on the other side, there are no words. All I can do is stare at the nameless bursting tomatoes and know they have to be enough.

Question - how does the form of this poem effect how you read it?

What are your feelings / thoughts about it?

Can you find a through-line, or do you feel like the poem is purposely scattered? How does that effect your reading?

(Context: Victoria Chang has a very interesting collection of poems where each poem is written in the form of an obituary - this is 1 from that collection)

chi: oh man, this poem is awesome... I really like this collection and would recommend it! my sister got it for a poetry class years ago and I just stole it. really feeling this sense of stream-of-consciousness that really captures how grief tends to feel. not ever really "linear" in a clean sense, spilling out of you yes, that "overwhelmed and overflowing feeling" comes out from the first sentence!-> "time breaks for the living eventually." I like the form for sure, the constant moving from caretakers to walls to the father and to more abstract ideas like language we carry (or somehow manage to lose), does really mimic that grief is this movement of people or ideas before you have time to settle. the different definitions (like the door -> wall, window -> see through wall) also does feel really fitting, like trying to "categorize" things you don't quite want to think of / can't make sense of before you have had time to process them completely. renaming things is a sense of control, maybe? tomatoes are incredibly "alive" in the sense of ripening, (the ultimate summer food) reaching their real "peak" of life that they will inevitably not be able to reach

again. really interesting to see that juxtaposed with the death of the father, you get to see both sides of the spectrum. I also do think there is a clear through-line, even if the poem feels scattered on the surface - there is a constant separation between two opposing ideas: living and dying, inside and outside, caring and yet being unable to do anything for someone you care about. in a way, I think the lack of any clean story or explanation makes the smaller, more fragile moments more sacred. Ah I like how you put that.

alliyah: how does the form effect - knowing it's supposed to be an obituary makes me read it looking for death, but also devotion, the poem on the other hand does not feel very directly nostalgic or adoring even though they are speaking of a father - which makes it feel a little uncomfortable (not sure if you've ever read an obituary that feels really distant?! but they are uncomfortable to read, we want to think well of people who've passed) but the subject of caretakers is another really uncomfortable subject - they have a difficult / holy / sacrificial job / but ah! it's hard! framing the husband in prison - and then portraying another prison of being between life and death and that contrast is interesting. I love how random the tomatoes seem, but how its such a good image for that spring / longing / life that is too far to touch. My feeling I get reading this poem is discomfort and frustration and not "liminal" spaces but more "trapped places" (dying, prison, planes, boxes, rooms) it's overwhelming.

The through line I get is Isolation; which is one that rings out of grief so strongly - in a way to me that makes the poem feel validating to read because the worst feeling about isolation is like... you're alone in it? so putting words / images to it I love that.