From Mark Strand,
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Poetic Invention (2000)

# *Introduction to*
# The Best American Poetry 1991

I

It is 1957. I am home on vacation from art school, sitting across from my mother in the living room. We are talking about my future. My mother feels I have picked a difficult profession. I will have to struggle in obscurity, and it may be years and years before I am recognized; even then there is no guarantee that I will be able to make a living or support a family. She thinks it would be wiser for me to become a lawyer or a doctor. It is then that I tell her that although I have just begun art school, I am actually more interested in poetry. "But then you'll *never* be able to earn a living," she says. My mother is concerned that I shall suffer needlessly. I tell her that the pleasures to be gotten from poetry far exceed those that come with wealth or stability. I offer to read her some of my favorite poems by Wallace Stevens. I begin "The Idea of Order at Key West." In a few minutes, my mother's eyes are closed and her head leans to one side. She is asleep in her chair.

II

I do not intend to make fun of my mother. Her failure to respond as I had wished was actually the failing of most people. Hearing poems read, like reading them, is different from other encounters with language. Nothing else we read prepares us for poetry. My mother was a reader of novels and books of general nonfiction. Her responses to what she read were, I believe, knowing and well articulated. But how is poetry different from what she was used to? The difference that comes to mind first is that the context of a poem is likely to be only the poet's voice—a voice speaking to no one in particular and unsupported by a situation or situations brought about by the words or actions of others, as in a work of fiction. A sense of itself is what the poem sponsors, and not a sense of the world. It invents itself: its own necessity or urgency, its tone, its mixture of meaning and sound are in the poet's voice. It is in such isolation that it engenders its authority. A novel, if it is to be believed, must share characteristics with the world we live in. Its people must act in ways we recognize as human, and do so in places and with objects that seem believable. We are better prepared for reading fiction because most of what it tells us is already known. In a poem, most of what is said is neither known nor unknown. The world of things or the world of experience that may have given rise to the poem usually dissolves into the background. It is as if the poem were replacing that world as a way of establishing its own primacy, oddly asserting itself over the world.



What is known in a poem is its language; that is, the words it uses. Yet those words seem different in a poem. Even the most familiar will seem strange. In a poem, each word, being equally important, exists in absolute focus, having a weight it rarely achieves in fiction. (Some notable exceptions can be found in the works of Joyce, Beckett, and Virginia Woolf.) Words in a novel are subordinate to broad slices of action or characterization that push the plot forward. In a poem, they *are* the action. That is why poems establish themselves right away—in a line or two—and why experienced readers of poetry can tell immediately if the poem they are reading possesses any authority. On the other hand, it would be hard for a reader to know much about a novel on the basis of its first sentence. We usually give it a dozen or so pages to earn its right to our attention. And, most often, it has our attention when its language has all but disappeared into the events it generated. We tend to be much more comfortable reading a novel when we don't feel distracted by its language. What we want while reading a novel is to get on with it. A poem works the opposite way. It encourages slowness, urges us to savor each word. It is in poetry that the power of language is most palpably felt. But in a culture that favors speed-reading along with fast food, ten-second news bites, and other abbreviated forms of ingestion, who wants something that makes you slow down?

III

The reading of nonfiction is no greater help than the reading of fiction in preparing one for poetry. Both my parents were avid readers of nonfiction, pursuing information not just for enlightenment but to feel in control of a world they had little say in. Their need for certainty was proportional to their sense of doubt. If one had facts—or what passed for facts—at one's fingertips, one could not only banish uncertainty but also entertain the illusion that one lived in a fixed and static universe, in a world that was passive and predictable and from which mystery was exiled. No wonder poetry was not something my parents found themselves reading for pleasure. It was the enemy. It would only remystify the world for them, cloud certainties with ambiguity, challenge their appetite for the sort of security that knowledge brings. For readers like my parents, poetry's flirtations with erasure, contingency, even nonsense, are tough to take. And what may be still tougher to take is that poetry, in its figurativeness, its rhythms, endorses a state of verbal suspension. Poetry is language performing at its most beguiling and seductive while being, at the same time, elusive, even seeming to mock one's desire for reduction, for plain and available order. It is not just that various meanings are preferable to a single dominant meaning; it may be that something beyond "meaning" is being communicated, something that originated not with the poet but in the first dim light of language, in some period of "beforeness." It may



be, therefore, that reading poetry is often a search for the unknown, something that lies at the heart of experience but cannot be pointed out or described without being altered or diminished—something that nevertheless can be contained so that it is not so terrifying. It is not knowledge but rather some occasion for belief, some reason for assent, some avowal of being. It is mysterious or opaque, and even as it invites the reader, it wards him off. This unknown can make him uncomfortable, force him to do things that would make it seem less strange, and this usually means inventing a context in which to set it, something that counteracts the disembodiedness of the poem. As I have suggested, it may have to do with the origin of the poem—out of what dark habitation it emerged. The contexts we construct in our own defense may shed some light, may even explain parts or features of the poem, but they will never replace it in the wholeness of its utterance. Despite its power to enchant, the poem will always resist all but partial meanings.

IV

It could be that my mother, on that day in 1957, sensed this and felt that she was safer within the confines of her own darkness than within the one supplied by Wallace Stevens. But not all poems try to remind us of the dark or the unknown at the center of our experience. Some try not to, choosing to speak of what is known, of common experiences

in which our humanness is most powerfully felt, experiences that we share with those who lived hundreds of years ago. It is a difficult task—to speak through the poetic and linguistic conventions of a particular time about that which seems not to have changed. Each poem must, to a certain extent, speak for itself, for its own newness—its ties to and distortions of the conventions of the moment. It must make us believe that what we are reading belongs to us even though we know that what it tells us is really old. This is a form of deception that makes it possible for poetry to escape the commonplace. It is when the conventions of another time, which have been worked and reworked, are used again that we have banality—those tired, sentimental verses, say, that are the stuff of greeting cards. And yet it is precisely through certain vital conventions that we recognize poetry to be poetry. By using old metaphors, recombining them, altering them slightly, by using meters, by re-employing rhyme schemes and stanzaic patterns, fitting them to contemporary speech, its syntax, its idioms, poems pay homage to the poems that preceded them. And this is something that someone unfamiliar with poetry may not know, and on hearing or reading a poem will not catch. This is the secret life of poetry. It is always paying homage to the past, extending a tradition into the present. My mother, who was not a reader of poetry, could not possibly have been aware of this other life of the poem.



V

It is 1965. My mother has died. My first book of poems has been published. My father, who, like my mother, has never been a reader of poems, reads my book. I am moved. The image of my father pondering what I have written fills me with unutterable joy. He wants to talk to me about the poems, but it is hard for him to begin. Finally, he starts. He finds some of the poems confusing and would like me to clarify them. He finds others perfectly clear and is eager to let me know how much they mean to him. The ones that mean most are those that speak for his sense of loss following my mother's death. They seem to tell him what he knows but cannot say. They tell him in so many words what he is feeling. They bring him back to himself. He can read my poems—and I should say that they might have been anyone's poems—and be in possession of his loss instead of being possessed by it.

The way poetry has of setting our internal house in order, of formalizing emotion difficult to articulate, is one of the reasons we still depend on it in moments of crisis and during those times when it is important that we know, in so many words, what we are going through. I am thinking of funerals in particular, but the same is true of marriages and birthdays. Without poetry, we would have either silence or banality, the former leaving us to our own inadequate devices for experiencing illumination, the latter cheapening with generalization what we wished to have for ourselves alone, turning our experience into impoverishment, our sense of

ourselves into embarrassment. Had my father lived longer, he might have become a reader of poetry. He had found a need for it—not just a need for my poetry but for the language of poetry, the ways in which it makes sense. And now, even though it is years later, I sometimes think, when I am writing well, that my father would be pleased, and I think, too, that could she hear those lines, my mother would awaken from her brief nap and give me her approval.

# THE MARRIAGE

The wind comes from opposite poles,
traveling slowly.

She turns in the deep air.
He walks in the clouds.

She readies herself,
shakes out her hair,

makes up her eyes,
smiles.

The sun warms her teeth,
the tip of her tongue moistens them.

He brushes the dust from his suit
and straightens his tie.

He smokes.
Soon they will meet.

The wind carries them closer.
They wave.

Closer, closer.
They embrace.

She is making a bed.
He is pulling off his pants.

They marry
and have a child.

The wind carries them off
in different directions.

This wind is strong, he thinks
as he straightens his tie.

I like this wind, she says
as she puts on her dress.

The wind unfolds.
The wind is everything to them.



In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

# THE REMAINS

*for Bill and Sandy Bailey*

I empty myself of the names of others. I empty my pockets.
I empty my shoes and leave them beside the road.
At night I turn back the clocks;
I open the family album and look at myself as a boy.

What good does it do? The hours have done their job.
I say my own name. I say goodbye.
The words follow each other downwind.
I love my wife but send her away.

My parents rise out of their thrones
into the milky rooms of clouds. How can I sing?
Time tells me what I am. I change and I am the same.
I empty myself of my life and my life remains.

# IN CELEBRATION

You sit in a chair, touched by nothing, feeling
the old self become the older self, imagining
only the patience of water, the boredom of stone.
You think that silence is the extra page,
you think that nothing is good or bad, not even
the darkness that fills the house while you sit watching
it happen. You've seen it happen before. Your friends
move past the window, their faces soiled with regret.
You want to wave but cannot raise your hand.
You sit in a chair. You turn to the nightshade spreading
a poisonous net around the house. You taste
the honey of absence. It is the same wherever
you are, the same if the voice rots before
the body, or the body rots before the voice.
You know that desire leads only to sorrow, that sorrow
leads to achievement which leads to emptiness.
You know that this is different, that this
is the celebration, the only celebration,
that by giving yourself over to nothing,
you shall be healed. You know there is joy in feeling
your lungs prepare themselves for an ashen future,
so you wait, you stare and you wait, and the dust settles
and the miraculous hours of childhood wander in darkness.

# THE IDEA

*for Nolan Miller*

For us, too, there was a wish to possess
Something beyond the world we knew, beyond ourselves,
Beyond our power to imagine, something nevertheless
In which we might see ourselves; and this desire
Came always in passing, in waning light, and in such cold
That ice on the valley's lakes cracked and rolled,
And blowing snow covered what earth we saw,
And scenes from the past, when they surfaced again,
Looked not as they had, but ghostly and white
Among false curves and hidden erasures;
And never once did we feel we were close
Until the night wind said, "Why do this,
Especially now? Go back to the place you belong";
And there appeared, with its windows glowing, small,
In the distance, in the frozen reaches, a cabin;
And we stood before it, amazed at its being there,
And would have gone forward and opened the door,
And stepped into the glow and warmed ourselves there,
But that it was ours by not being ours,
And should remain empty. That was the idea.

# OLD MAN LEAVES PARTY

It was clear when I left the party
That though I was over eighty I still had
A beautiful body. The moon shone down as it will
On moments of deep introspection. The wind held its breath.
And look, somebody left a mirror leaning against a tree.
Making sure that I was alone, I took off my shirt.
The flowers of bear grass nodded their moon-washed heads.
I took off my pants and the magpies circled the redwoods.
Down in the valley the creaking river was flowing once more.
How strange that I should stand in the wilds alone with my body.
I know what you are thinking. I was like you once. But now
With so much before me, so many emerald trees, and
Weed-whitened fields, mountains and lakes, how could I not
Be only myself, this dream of flesh, from moment to moment?

## ELEVATOR

1

The elevator went to the basement. The doors opened.
A man stepped in and asked if I was going up.
"I'm going down," I said. "I won't be going up."

2

The elevator went to the basement. The doors opened.
A man stepped in and asked if I was going up.
"I'm going down," I said. "I won't be going up."

## A PIECE OF THE STORM

*for Sharon Horvath*

From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,
A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your room
And made its way to the arm of the chair where you, looking up
From your book, saw it the moment it landed. That's all
There was to it. No more than a solemn waking
To brevity, to the lifting and falling away of attention, swiftly,
A time between times, a flowerless funeral. No more than that
Except for the feeling that this piece of the storm,
Which turned into nothing before your eyes, would come back,
That someone years hence, sitting as you are now, might say:
"It's time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening."

## THE ENIGMA OF THE INFINITESIMAL

You've seen them at dusk, walking along the shore, seen them standing in doorways, leaning from windows, or straddling the slow-moving edge of a shadow. Lovers of the in-between, they are neither here nor there, neither in nor out. Poor souls, they are driven to experience the impossible. Even at night, they lie in bed with one eye closed and the other open, hoping to catch the last second of consciousness and the first of sleep, to inhabit that no-man's-land, that beautiful place, to behold as only a god might, the luminous conjunction of nothing and all.

## PROVISIONAL ETERNITY

A man and a woman lay in bed. "Just one more time," said the man, "just one more time." "Why do you keep saying that?" said the woman. "Because I never want it to end," said the man. "What don't you want to end?" said the woman. "This," said the man, "this never wanting it to end."