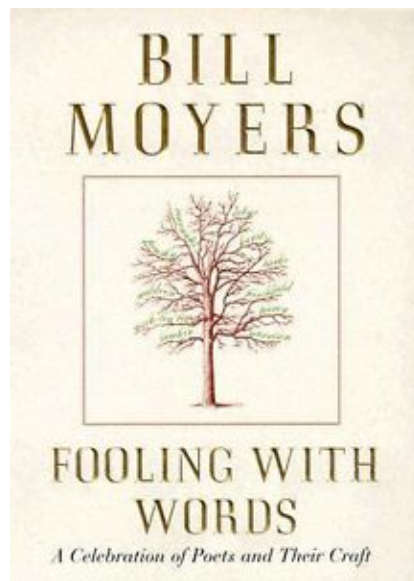


Texas Christian University

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Poetry – Fooling with Words
A Bill Moyers Special



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“We have fallen into the place where everything is music. That’s what the Festival feels like—we feel this vast interconnectedness. It’s amazing that this many people can be really genuinely excited about fooling with words.”
—Coleman Barks

from *New Year’s Day Nap* by Coleman Barks
Fiesta Bowl on low.

My son lying here on the couch
on the “Dad” pillow he made for me
in the Seventh Grade. Now a sophomore
at Georgia Southern, driving back later today,
he sleeps with his white top hat over his face.

I’m a dancin’ fool.

Twenty years ago, half the form
he sleeps within came out of nowhere
with a million micro-lemmings who all died but one
piercer of membrane, specially picked to start a brainmaking,
egg-drop soup, that stirred two sun and moon centers
for a new-painted sky in the tiniest
ballroom imaginable.

Now he’s rousing, six feet long,
turning on his side. Now he’s gone.

Jars of Springwater

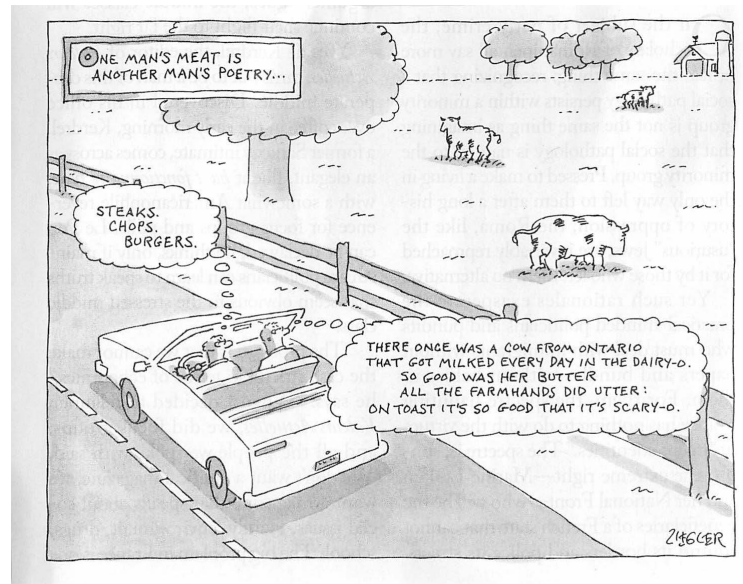
Jars of springwater are not enough
anymore. Take us down to the river!

The face of peace, the sun itself.
No more the slippery cloudlike moon.

Give us one clear morning after another
and the one whose work remains unfinished,

who *is* our work as we diminish, idle,
though occupied, empty, and open.

by Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks



Where Everything Is Music

Don't worry about saving these songs!
And if one of our instruments breaks,
it doesn't matter.

We have fallen into the place
where everything is music.

The strumming and the flute notes
rise into the atmosphere,
and even if the whole world's harp
should burn up, there will still be
hidden instruments playing.

So the candle flickers and goes out.
We have a piece of flint, and a spark.

This singing art is sea foam.
The graceful movements come from a pearl
somewhere on the ocean floor.

Poems reach up like spindrift and the edge
of driftwood along the beach, wanting!

They derive
from a slow and powerful root
that we can't see.

Stop the words now.
Open the window in the center of your chest,
and let the spirits fly in and out.

by Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

oh absalom my son my son by Lucille Clifton

even as i turned myself from you
i longed to hold you oh
my wild haired son

running in the wilderness away
from me from us
into a thicket you could not foresee

if you had stayed
i feared you would kill me
if you left i feared you would die

oh my son
my son
what does the Lord require

Golden Retrievals by Mark Doty

Fetch? Balls and sticks capture my attention
seconds at a time. Catch? I don't think so.
Bunny, tumbling leaf, a squirrel who's—oh
joy—actually scared. Sniff the wind, then

I'm off again: muck, pond, ditch, residue
of any thrillingly dead thing. And you?
Either you're sunk in the past, half our walk,
thinking of what you can never bring back,

or else you're off in some fog concerning
—tomorrow, is that what you call it? My work:
to unsnare time's warp (and woof!), retrieving,
my haze-headed friend, you. This shining bark,

a Zen master's bronzy gong, calls you here,
entirely, now: bow-wow, bow-wow, bow-wow.

from Messiah (Christmas Portions)

Who'd have thought
they'd be so good? *Every valley*,
proclaims the solo tenor,
(a sleek blonde

I've seen somewhere before
—the liquor store?) *shall be exalted*,
and in his handsome mouth the word
is lifted and opened

into more syllables
than we could count, central *ah*
dilated in a baroque melisma,
liquefied; the pour

of voice seems
to *make* the unplanned landscape
the text predicts the Lord
will heighten and tame.

This music
demonstrates what it claims:
glory shall be revealed. If art's
acceptable evidence,

mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?
The tenors lack confidence,

and the soloists,
half of them anyway, don't
have the strength to found
the mighty kingdoms

these passages propose
—but the chorus, all together,
equals my burning clouds,
and seems itself to burn,

commingled powers
deeded to a larger, centering claim.
These aren't anyone we know;
choiring dissolves

familiarity in an up-
pouring rush which will not
rest, will not, for a moment,
be still.

Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire? Everything,
the choir insists,

might flame;
inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quicken, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,
lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change.

Brian Age Seven

Grateful for their tour
of the pharmacy,
the first-grade class
has drawn these pictures,
each self-portrait taped
to the window-glass,
faces wide to the street,
round and available,
with parallel lines for hair.

I like this one best: Brian,
whose attenuated name
fills a quarter of the frame,
stretched beside impossible
legs descending from the ball
of his torso, two long arms
springing from that same
central sphere. He breathes here,

on his page. It isn't craft
that makes this figure come alive;
Brian draws just balls and lines,
in wobbly crayon strokes.
Why do some marks
seem to thrill with life,
possess a portion
of the nervous energy
in their maker's hand?

That big curve of a smile
reaches nearly to the rim
of his face; he holds
a towering ice cream,
brown spheres teetering
on their cone,

a soda fountain gift
half the length of him
—as if it were the flag

of his own country held high
by the unadorned black line
of his arm. Such naked support
for so much delight! Artless boy,
he's found a system of beauty:
he shows us pleasure
and what pleasure resists.
The ice cream is delicious.
He's frail beside his relentless standard.

Mark Doty

The Envoy by Jane Hirshfield

One day in that room, a small rat.
Two days later, a snake.

Who, seeing me enter,
whipped the long stripe of his
body under the bed,
then curled like a docile house-pet.

I don't know how either came or left.
Later, the flashlight found nothing.

For a year I watched
as something—terror? happiness? grief?—
entered and then left my body.

Not knowing how it came in,
Not knowing how it went out.

It hung where words could not reach it.
It slept where light could not go.
Its scent was neither snake nor rat,
neither sensualist nor ascetic.

There are openings in our lives
of which we know nothing.

Through them
the belled herds travel at will,
long-legged and thirsty, covered with foreign dust.

Symposium by Paul Muldoon

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it hold
its nose to the grindstone and hunt with the hounds.
Every dog has a stitch in time. Two heads? You've been
sold
one good turn. One good turn deserves a bird in the hand.

A bird in the hand is better than no bread.
To have your cake is to pay Paul.
Make hay while you can still hit the nail on the head.
For want of a nail the sky might fall.

People in glass houses can't see the wood
for the new broom. Rome wasn't built between two stools.

Empty vessels wait for no man.

A hair of the dog is a friend indeed.
There's no fool like the fool
who's shot his bolt. There's no smoke after the horse is
gone.

Halley's Comet by Stanley Kunitz

Miss Murphy in first grade
wrote its name in chalk
across the board and told us
it was roaring down the stormtracks
of the Milky Way at frightful speed
and if it wandered off its course
and smashed into the earth
there'd be no school tomorrow.
A red-bearded preacher from the hills
with a wild look in his eyes
stood in the public square
at the playground's edge
proclaiming he was sent by God
to save every one of us,
even the little children.
"Repent, ye sinners!" he shouted,
waving his hand-lettered sign.
At supper I felt sad to think
that it was probably
the last meal I'd share
with my mother and my sisters;
but I felt excited too
and scarcely touched my plate.
So mother scolded me
and sent me early to my room.
The whole family's asleep
except for me. They never heard me steal
into the stairwell hall and climb
the ladder to the fresh night air.

Look for me, Father, on the roof
of the red brick building
at the foot of Green Street—
that's where we live, you know, on the top floor.
I'm the boy in the white flannel gown
sprawled on this coarse gravel bed
searching the starry sky,
waiting for the world to end.

The Clasp by Sharon Olds

She was four, he was one, it was raining, we had colds,
we had been in the apartment two weeks straight,
I grabbed her to keep her from shoving him over on his
face, again, and when I had her wrist
in my grasp I compressed it, fiercely, for a couple
of seconds, to make an impression on her,
to hurt her, our beloved firstborn, I even almost
savored the stinging sensation of the squeezing,
the expression, into her, of my anger,
“*Never, never, again,*” the righteous
chant accompanying the clasp. It happened very
fast—grab, crush, crush,
crush, release—and at the first extra
force, she swung her head, as if checking
who this was, and looked at me,
and saw me—yes, this was her mom,
her mom was doing this. Her dark,
deeply open eyes took me
in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment
she learned me. This was her mother, one of the
two whom she most loved, the two
who loved her most, near the source of love
was this.

To Television by Robert Pinsky

Not a “window on the world”
But as we call you,
A box a tube

Terrarium of dreams and wonders.
Coffer of shades, ordained
Cotillion of phosphors
Or liquid crystal

Homey miracle, tub
Of acquiescence, vein of defiance.
Your patron in the pantheon would be Hermes

Raster dance,
Quick one, little thief, escort
Of the dying and comfort of the sick,

In a blue glow my father and little sister sat
Snuggled in one chair watching you
Their wife and mother was sick in the head

I scorned you and them as I scorned so much

Now I like you best in a hotel room,
Maybe minutes
Before I have to face an audience: behind
The doors of the armoire, box
Within a box—Tom & Jerry, or also brilliant
And reassuring, Oprah Winfrey.

Thank you, for I watched, I watched
Sid Caesar speaking French and Japanese not
Through knowledge but imagination,
His quickness, and Thank you, I watched live
Jackie Robinson stealing

Home, the image—O strung shell—enduring
Fleeter than light like these words we
Remember in: they too are winged
At the helmet and ankles.

I Chop Some Parsley While Listening To Art Blakey's Version Of "Three Blind Mice"

And I start wondering how they came to be blind.
If it was congenital, they could be brothers and sister,
and I think of the poor mother
brooding over her sightless young triplets.

Or was it a common accident, all three caught
in a searing explosion, a firework perhaps?
If not,
if each came to his or her blindness separately,

how did they ever manage to find one another?
Would it not be difficult for a blind mouse
to locate even one fellow mouse with vision
let alone two other blind ones?

And how, in their tiny darkness,
could they possibly have run after a farmer's wife
or anyone else's wife for that matter?
Not to mention why.

Just so she could cut off their tails
with a carving knife, is the cynic's answer,
but the thought of them without eyes
and now without tails to trail through the moist grass

or slip around the corner of a baseboard

has the cynic who always lounges within me
up off his couch and at the window
trying to hide the rising softness that he feels.

By now I am on to dicing an onion
which might account for the wet stinging
in my own eyes, though Freddie Hubbard's
mournful trumpet on "Blue Moon,"

which happens to be the next cut,
cannot be said to be making matters any better.

Billy Collins

Because My Students Asked Me
By Taylor Mali

what i would want them to do
at my funeral, i told them:

write & perform a collective poem
in which each of you says a line
about what i was like as a teacher,
about how i made you reach for stars
until you became them,
about how much you loved
to pretend
you hated me.

*You mean even after you die
You're going to make us do work?*