

## Poems and Prose for Memorization and Reading Aloud Spring 2007

### 1. **Twilight** Sara Teasdale American (1884-1933)

Dreamily over the roofs  
The cold spring rain is falling;  
Out in the lonely tree  
A bird is calling, calling.

Slowly over the earth  
The wings of night are falling;  
My heart like the bird in the tree  
Is calling, calling, calling.

### 2. From: **A Christmas Memory** Truman Capote American (1924-1984)

Seven-year-old Truman Capote, abandoned by his parents and raised by dirt-poor relatives in Alabama, is closest friends with his distant cousin, an elderly, simple minded, and slightly crippled woman named Sook. On a cold and empty Christmas afternoon she exclaims to him:

“‘My, how foolish I am!’ she cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. ‘You know what I’ve always thought?’ she asks in a tone of discovery, and not smiling at me but a point beyond. ‘I’ve always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun shining through, such a shine you don’t know it’s getting dark. And it’s been a comfort: to think of that shine takes away all the spooky feeling. But I’ll wager it never happens. I’ll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are,’ – her hand circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie, our dog, pawing earth over her bone – ‘just what they’ve always seen, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes.’”

Truman Capote, *A Christmas Memory*, Modern Library, 1996, originally published in 1956, pp. 26-7.

### 3. **To My Dear and Loving Husband** Anne Bradstreet American (1612-1672)

If ever two were one then surely we,  
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;  
If ever wife were happy in a man,  
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.  
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold  
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.  
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,  
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.  
Thy love is such I can no way repay,  
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.  
Then while we live, in love let’s so persevere  
That when we live no more, we may live ever.

### 4. From: **The Maltese Falcon** Dashiell Hammett American (1894-1961)

Fictional detective Sam Spade tells the story of a Mr. Flitcraft, who has a good life, but completely disappears, abandoning his wife and two small children:

“Here’s what happened to him. Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up – just the skeleton. A beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk along side him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn’t touch him, though a piece of sidewalk was chipped off and flew up and hit his cheek. It only took a piece of skin off, but he still had the scar when I saw him. He rubbed it with his fingers – well, affectionately – when he told me about it. He was scared stiff of course, he said, but he was

more shocked than really frightened. He felt like somebody had taken the lid off his life and let him look at the works.

“Flitcraft had been a good citizen and a good husband and father, not by any outer compulsion, but simply because he was a man who was most comfortable in step with his surroundings. He had been raised that way. The people he knew were like that. The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things. He, the good citizen-husband-father, could be wiped out between office and restaurant by the accident of a falling beam. He knew then that men died at haphazard like that, and lived only while blind chance spared them.

“It was not, primarily, the injustice of it that disturbed him: he accepted that after the first shock. What disturbed him was the discovery that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, not into step, with life. He said he knew before he had got twenty feet from the fallen beam that he would never know peace again until he had adjusted himself to this new glimpse of life. By the time he had eaten his luncheon he had found his means of adjustment. Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away. He loved his family, he said, as much as he supposed was usual, but he knew he was leaving them adequately provided for, and his love for them was not of the sort that would make absence painful.

“He went to Seattle that afternoon ... and from there by boat to San Francisco. For a couple of years he wandered around and then drifted back to the Northwest, and settled in Spokane and got married. His second wife didn’t look like the first, but they were more alike than they were different. You know, the kind of women that play fair games of golf and bridge and like new salad-recipes. He wasn’t sorry for what he had done. It seemed reasonable enough to him. I don’t think he even knew he had settled back into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that’s the part of it I always liked. He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.”

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, Vintage, 1992, originally published 1929, pp. 63-4.

## 5. **I Married You** Linda Pastan American (1932- )

I married you  
for all the wrong reasons,  
charmed by your  
dangerous family history,  
by the innocent muscles, bulging  
like hidden weapons  
under your shirt,  
by your naive ties, the colors  
of painted scraps of sunset.

I was charmed too  
by your assumptions  
about me: my serenity —  
that mirror waiting to be cracked,  
my flashy acrobatics with knives  
in the kitchen.  
How wrong we both were  
about each other,  
and how happy we have been.

## 6. **From: I Don’t Want to Talk About It** Terence Real American

In this excerpt, Terence Real, Harvard researcher and clinical psychotherapist, speaks to the tendency prevalent among men to relate to others from a position of subordination or superiority, rather than openly as equals. His book examines the adverse effect of this tendency on relationships with partners and self. He argues that this inability both leads to forms of depression and serves as a mechanism for coping with this depression. In this excerpt, he shows the cultural prevalence of this archetype:

“The pattern in males of moving from the helpless, depressed, ‘one-down’ position to a transfigured, grandiose, ‘one-up’ position has become one of the most powerful and ubiquitous narratives in modern times.

The hero, a meek, quiet, strong man of principle, is bullied and pressed to the wall. He is humiliated and abused, often physically. Then comes the turnaround. Clark Kent rips off his business suit to become Superman; David Banner transforms when angered into the Incredible Hulk. The 'weakling' stands up. In a recurring scene that lies at the heart of the film *Taxi Driver*, Robert De Niro stares into a mirror and challenges an imagined enemy. 'Are you looking at me?' he threatens. 'Are you looking at me?' ...

Terence Real, *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, Scribner, 1997, pp. 63-9.

## 7. **Where The Mind is Without Fear** Rabindranath Tagore Bengali (1861-1941)

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

## 8. From: **Guns, Germs and Steel**

Jared Diamond American (1937- )

Jared Diamond on why China lost its technological lead !! a lesson in the consequences of stifling innovation:

"Medieval China led the world in technology. The long list of its major technological firsts includes cast iron, the compass, gunpowder, paper, printing, and many others mentioned earlier. It also led the world in political power, navigation, and control of the seas. In the early 15th century it sent treasure fleets, each consisting of hundreds of ships up to 400 feet long and with total crews of up to 28,000, across the Indian Ocean as far as the east coast of Africa, decades before Columbus's three puny ships crossed the narrow Atlantic Ocean. Why didn't Chinese ships colonize Europe? Why did China lose its technological lead to the formerly so backward Europe? ...

"[The answer is] a power struggle between two factions in the Chinese court. The former faction had been identified with the fleets. Hence when the latter faction gained the upper hand in a power struggle, it stopped sending fleets. The episode is reminiscent of the legislation that strangled development of public lighting in London in the 1880s, the isolationism of the United States between the First and Second World Wars, and any number of backward steps in any number of countries. But in China there was a difference, because the entire region was politically unified. One decision stopped fleets over the whole of China [and] became irreversible.

"Now contrast those events in China with what happened when fleets of exploration began to sail from politically fragmented Europe. Christopher Columbus, an Italian by birth, switched his allegiance to the duke of Anjou in France, then to the king of Portugal. When the latter refused his request for ships in which to explore westward, Columbus turned to the duke of Medina-Celi, who did likewise, and finally to the king and queen of Spain, who denied Columbus's first request but eventually granted his renewed appeal. Had Europe been united under any of the first three rulers, its colonization of the Americas might have been stillborn. In fact, precisely because Europe was fragmented, Columbus succeeded on his fifth try..."

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Norton, 1997, pp. 412-3.

## 9. **Upon Love** Robert Herrick English (1591-1634)

I held Love's head while it did ache;  
But so it chanced to be,  
The cruel pain did his forsake,  
And forthwith came to me.

Ai me! how shall my grief be still'd?  
Or where else shall we find  
One like to me, who must be kill'd  
For being too-too-kind?

**10. From: *Stumbling on Happiness* Daniel Gilbert American (1957- )**

On how human beings think about the future:

“The human being is the only animal that thinks about the future. Now ... I do recognize that non-human animals often act as though they have the capacity to think about the future. ... For example ... the squirrels in my yard act as though they know they will be unable to eat later unless they bury some food now ... [but instead] they have regular squirrel brains that run food-burying programs when the amount of sunlight that enters their regular squirrel eyes decreases by a critical amount. Shortened days trigger burying behavior with no intervening contemplation of tomorrow ... Until a chimp weeps at the thought of growing old alone, or turns down a Fudgsicle because it already looks to fat in shorts, I will stand by my [statement]. We think about the future in a way that no other animal can, does, or ever has, and this simple, ubiquitous, ordinary act is a defining feature of our humanity. ...

“The greatest achievements of the human brain is its ability to imagine objects and episodes that do not exist in the realm of the real, and it is this ability that allows us to think about the future. As one philosopher noted, the human brain is an ‘anticipation machine,’ and ‘making future’ is the most important thing it does.”

Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*, Knopf, 2006, pp. 4-5.

**11. *Home* Rupert Brooke English (1887-1915)**

I came back late and tired last night  
Into my little room,  
To the long chair and the firelight  
And comfortable gloom.

But as I entered softly in  
I saw a woman there,  
The line of neck and cheek and chin,  
The darkness of her hair,  
The form of one I did not know  
Sitting in my chair.

I stood a moment fierce and still,  
Watching her neck and hair.  
I made a step to her; and saw  
That there was no one there.

It was some trick of the firelight  
That made me see her there.  
It was a chance of shade and light  
And the cushion in the chair.

Oh, all you happy over the earth,  
That night, how could I sleep?  
I lay and watched the lonely gloom;  
And watched the moonlight creep  
From wall to basin, round the room,  
All night I could not sleep.

**12. From: “*A Natural History of Peace*” Robert M. Sapolsky American (1957- )**

Perhaps the xenophobia that seems so intractable in certain nations and populations really isn’t that intractable – and the brain’s amygdala plays a crucial role in the analysis:

“In exploring [relations among different groups], one often encounters a pessimism built around the notion that humans ... are hard-wired for xenophobia. Some brain-imaging studies have appeared to support this view in a particularly discouraging way. There is a structure deep inside the brain called the amygdala, which

plays a key role in fear and aggression, and experiments have shown that when subjects are presented with a face of someone from a different race, the amygdala gets metabolically active – aroused, alert, ready for action. This happens even when the face is presented ‘subliminally,’ which is to say, so rapidly that the subject does not consciously see it.

“More recent studies, however, should mitigate this pessimism. Test a person who has a lot of experience with people of different races, and the amygdala does not activate; or, as in a wonderful experiment by Susan Fiske of Princeton University, subtly bias the subject beforehand to think of people as individuals rather than as members of a group, and the amygdala does not budge. ...

“The first half of the twentieth century was drenched in the blood spilled by German and Japanese aggression, yet only a few decades later it is hard to think of two countries more pacific. Sweden spent the seventeenth century rampaging through Europe, yet it is now an icon of nurturing tranquility.”

Robert M. Sapolsky, “A Natural History of Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2006, pp. 119-120.

### **13. Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem** Helene Johnson American (1907-1995)

You are disdainful and magnificent –  
Your perfect body and your pompous gait,  
Your dark eyes flashing solemnly with hate,  
Small wonder that you are incompetent  
To imitate those whom you so despise –  
Your shoulders towering high above the throng,  
Your head thrown back in rich, barbaric song,  
Palm trees and mangoes stretched before your eyes.  
Let others toil and sweat for labor’s sake  
And wring from grasping hands their meed of gold.  
Why urge ahead your supercilious feet?  
Scorn will efface each footprint that you make.  
I love your laughter arrogant and bold.  
You are too splendid for this city street.

### **14. From: Peanuts: A Golden Celebration** Charles Schulz American (1922-2000)

“Children do not converse. They say things. They ask, they tell, and they talk, but they know nothing of one of the great joys in life, conversation. Then, along about twelve, give or take a year on either side, two young people sitting on their bicycles near a front porch on a summer evening begin to talk about others that they know, and conversation is discovered. Some confuse conversation with talking, of course, and go on for the rest of their lives, never stopping, boring others with meaningless chatter and complaints. But real conversation includes asking questions, and asking the right ones before it’s too late. ...

Charles Schulz, edited by David Larkin, *Peanuts: A Golden Celebration*, HarperResource, 1999, pp. 39, 41, 91, 120.

### **15. WINTER: TONIGHT: SUNSET** David Budbill American (1940- )

Tonight at sunset walking on the snowy road,  
my shoes crunching on the frozen gravel, first

through the woods, then out into the open fields  
past a couple of trailers and some pickup trucks, I stop

and look at the sky. Suddenly: orange, red, pink, blue,  
green, purple, yellow, gray, all at once and everywhere.

I pause in this moment at the beginning of my old age  
and I say a prayer of gratitude for getting to this evening

a prayer for being here, today, now, alive  
in this life, in this evening, under this sky.