

**Classic Poetry Series**

# **Amy Clampitt**

**- poems -**

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## **A Catalpa Tree On West Twelfth Street**

While the sun stops, or  
seems to, to define a term  
for the indeterminable,  
the human aspect, here  
in the West Village, spindles  
to a mutilated dazzle&mdash;

niched shards of solitude  
embedded in these brownstone  
walkups such that the Hudson  
at the foot of Twelfth Street  
might be a thing that's  
done with mirrors: definition

by deracination&mdash;grunge,  
hip-hop, Chinese takeout,  
co-ops&mdash;while the globe's  
elixir caters, year by year,  
to the resurgence of this  
climbing tentpole, frilled and stippled

yet again with bloom  
to greet the solstice:  
What year was it it over-  
took the fire escape? The  
roof's its next objective.  
Will posterity (if there

is any)pause to regret  
such layerings of shade,  
their cadenced crests' trans-  
valuation of decay, the dust  
and perfume of an all  
too terminable process?

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## A Hedge Of Rubber Trees

The West Village by then was changing; before long the rundown brownstones at its farthest edge would have slipped into trendier hands. She lived, impervious to trends, behind a potted hedge of rubber trees, with three cats, a canary—refuse from whose cage kept sifting down and then germinating, a yearning seedling choir, around the saucers on the windowsill—and an inexorable cohort of roaches she was too nearsighted to deal with, though she knew they were there, and would speak of them, ruefully, as of an affliction that might once, long ago, have been prevented.

Unclassifiable castoffs, misfits, marginal cases: when you're one yourself, or close to it, there's a reassurance in proving you haven't quite gone under by taking up with somebody odder than you are. Or trying to. "They're my friends," she'd say of her cats—Mollie, Mitzi and Caroline, their names were, and she was forever taking one or another in a cab to the vet—as though she had no others. The roommate who'd become a nun, the one who was Jewish, the couple she'd met on a foliage tour, one fall, were all people she no longer saw. She worked for a law firm, said all the judges were alcoholic, had never voted.

But would sometimes have me to dinner—breaded veal, white wine, strawberry Bavarian—and sometimes, from what she didn't know she was saying, I'd snatch a shred or two of her threadbare history. Baltic cold. Being sent home in a troika when her feet went numb. In summer, carriage rides. A swarm of gypsy children driven off with whips. An octogenarian father, bishop of a dying schismatic sect. A very young mother who didn't want her. A half-brother she met just once. Cousins in Wisconsin, one of whom phoned her from a candy store, out of the blue, while she was living in Chicago. What had brought her there, or when, remained unclear.

As did much else. We'd met in church. I noticed first a big, soaring soprano with a wobble in it, then the thickly wreathed and braided crimp in the mouse-gold coiffure. Old? Young? She was of no age. Through rimless lenses she looked out of a child's, or a doll's, globular blue. Wore Keds the year round, tended otherwise to overdress. Owned a mandolin. Once I got her to take it down from the mantel and plink out, through a warm fuddle of sauterne, a lot of giddy Italian airs from a songbook whose pages had started to crumble. The canary fluffed and quivered, and the cats, amazed, came out from under the couch and stared.

What could the offspring of the schismatic age and a reluctant child bride expect from life? Not much. Less and less. A dream she'd had kept coming back, years after. She'd taken a job in Washington with some right-wing lobby, and lived in one of those bow-windowed mansions that turn into roominghouses, and her room there had a full-length mirror: oval, with a molding, is the way I picture it. In her dream something woke her, she got up to look, and there in the glass she'd had was covered over&mdash;she gave it a wondering emphasis&mdash;with gray veils.

The West Village was changing. I was changing. The last time I asked her to dinner, she didn't show. Hours&mdash; or was it days?&mdash;later, she phoned to explain: she hadn't been able to find my block; a patrolman had steered her home. I spent my evenings canvassing for Gene McCarthy. Passing, I'd see her shades drawn, no light behind the rubber trees. She wasn't out, she didn't own a TV. She was in there, getting gently blotto. What came next, I wasn't brave enough to know. Only one day, passing, I saw new shades, quick-chic matchstick bamboo, going up where the waterstained old ones had been, and where the seedlings&mdash; O gray veils, gray veils&mdash;had risen and gone down.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## A Hermit Thrush

Nothing's certain. Crossing, on this longest day,  
the low-tide-uncovered isthmus, scrambling up  
the scree-slope of what at high tide  
will be again an island,

to where, a decade since well-being staked  
the slender, unpremeditated claim that brings us  
back, year after year, lugging the  
makings of another picnic&mdash;

the cucumber sandwiches, the sea-air-sanctified  
fig newtons&mdash;there's no knowing what the slamming  
seas, the gales of yet another winter  
may have done. Still there,

the gust-beleaguered single spruce tree,  
the ant-thronged, root-snelled moss, grass  
and clover tuffet underneath it,  
edges frazzled raw

but, like our own prolonged attachment, holding.  
Whatever moral lesson might commend itself,  
there's no use drawing one,  
there's nothing here

to seize on as exemplifying any so-called virtue  
(holding on despite adversity, perhaps) or  
any no-more-than-human tendency&mdash;  
stubborn adherence, say,

to a wholly wrongheaded tenet. Though to  
hold on in any case means taking less and less  
for granted, some few things seem nearly  
certain, as that the longest day

will come again, will seem to hold its breath,  
the months-long exhalation of diminishment  
again begin. Last night you woke me  
for a look at Jupiter,

that vast cinder wheeled unblinking  
in a bath of galaxies. Watching, we traveled  
toward an apprehension all but impossible  
to be held onto&mdash;

that no point is fixed, that there's no foothold  
but roams untethered save by such snells,  
such sailor's knots, such stays  
and guy wires as are

mainly of our own devising. From such an  
empyrean, aloof seraphic mentors urge us

to look down on all attachment,  
on any bonding, as

in the end untenable. Base as it is, from  
year to year the earth's sore surface  
mends and rebinds itself, however  
and as best it can, with

thread of cinquefoil, tendril of the magenta  
beach pea, trammel of bramble; with easings,  
mulchings, fragrances, the gray-green  
bayberry's cool poultice&mdash;

and what can't finally be mended, the salt air  
proceeds to buff and rarefy: the lopped carnage  
of the seaward spruce clump weathers  
lustrous, to wood-silver.

Little is certain, other than the tide that  
circumscribes us that still sets its term  
to every picnic&mdash;today we stayed too long  
again, and got our feet wet&mdash;

and all attachment may prove at best, perhaps,  
a broken, a much-mended thing. Watching  
the longest day take cover under  
a monk's-cowl overcast,

with thunder, rain and wind, then waiting,  
we drop everything to listen as a  
hermit thrush distills its fragmentary,  
hesitant, in the end

unbroken music. From what source (beyond us, or  
the wells within?) such links perceived arrive&mdash;  
diminished sequences so uninsistently  
not even human&mdash;there's

hardly a vocabulary left to wonder, uncertain  
as we are of so much in this existence, this  
botched, cumbersome, much-mended,  
not unsatisfactory thing.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## A Silence

past parentage or gender  
beyond sung vocables  
the slipped-between  
the so infinitesimal  
fault line  
a limitless  
interiority

beyond the woven  
unicorn the maiden  
(man-carved worm-eaten)  
God at her hip  
incipient  
the untransfigured  
cottontail  
bluebell and primrose  
growing wild a strawberry  
chagrin night terrors  
past the earthlit  
unearthly masquerade

(we shall be changed)

a silence opens

\*

the larval feeder  
naked hairy ravenous  
inventing from within  
itself its own  
raw stuffs'  
hooked silk-hung  
relinquishment

behind the mask  
the milkfat shivering  
sinew isinglass  
uncrumpling transient  
greed to reinvest

\*

names have been  
given (revelation  
kif nirvana  
syncope) for  
whatever gift  
unmasked  
gives birth to

torrents

fixities  
reincarnations of  
the angels  
Joseph Smith  
enduring  
martyrdom

a cavernous  
compunction driving  
founder-charlatans  
who saw in it  
the infinite  
love of God  
and had  
(George Fox  
was one)  
great openings

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Beach Glass

While you walk the water's edge,  
turning over concepts  
I can't envision, the honking buoy  
serves notice that at any time  
the wind may change,  
the reef-bell clatters  
its treble monotone, deaf as Cassandra  
to any note but warning. The ocean,  
cumbered by no business more urgent  
than keeping open old accounts  
that never balanced,  
goes on shuffling its millenniums  
of quartz, granite, and basalt.

It behaves

toward the permutations of novelty—  
driftwood and shipwreck, last night's  
beer cans, spilt oil, the coughed-up  
residue of plastic—with random  
impartiality, playing catch or tag  
ot touch-last like a terrier,  
turning the same thing over and over,  
over and over. For the ocean, nothing  
is beneath consideration.

The houses

of so many mussels and periwinkles  
have been abandoned here, it's hopeless  
to know which to salvage. Instead  
I keep a lookout for beach glass—  
amber of Budweiser, chrysoprase  
of Almadén and Gallo, lapis  
by way of (no getting around it,  
I'm afraid) Phillips'  
Milk of Magnesia, with now and then a rare  
translucent turquoise or blurred amethyst  
of no known origin.

The process

goes on forever: they came from sand,  
they go back to gravel,  
along with treasuries  
of Murano, the buttressed  
astonishments of Chartres,  
which even now are readying  
for being turned over and over as gravely  
and gradually as an intellect  
engaged in the hazardous  
redefinition of structures  
no one has yet looked at.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## **Easter Morning**

a stone at dawn  
cold water in the basin  
these walls' rough plaster  
imageless  
after the hammering  
of so much insistence  
on the need for naming  
after the travesties  
that passed as faces,  
grace: the unction  
of sheer nonexistence  
upwelling in this  
hyacinthine freshet  
of the unnamed  
the faceless

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Exmoor

Lost aboard the roll of Kodacolor that was to have superseded all need to remember Somerset were: a large flock

of winter-bedcover-thick-pelted sheep up on the moor; a stile, a church spire, and an excess, at Porlock,

of tenderly barbarous antique thatch in tandem with flowerbeds, relentlessly picturesque, along every sidewalk;

a millwheel; and a millbrook running down brown as beer. Exempt from the disaster. however, as either too quick

or too subtle to put on record, were these: the flutter of, beside the brown water, with a butterfly-like flick

of fan-wings, a bright black-and-yellow wagtail; at Dulverton on the moor, the flavor of the hot toasted teacake

drowning in melted butter we had along with a bus-tour-load of old people; the driver

's way of smothering every r in the wool of a West Country diphthong, and as a Somer-

set man, the warmth he had for the high, wild, heather-dank wold he drove us over.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Fog

A vagueness comes over everything,  
as though proving color and contour  
alike dispensable: the lighthouse  
extinct, the islands' spruce-tips  
drunk up like milk in the  
universal emulsion; houses  
reverting into the lost  
and forgotten; granite  
subsumed, a rumor  
in a mumble of ocean.

Tactile

definition, however, has not been  
totally banished: hanging  
tassel by tassel, panicked  
foxtail and needlegrass,  
dropseed, furred hawkweed,  
and last season's rose-hips  
are vested in silenced  
chimes of the finest,  
clearest sea-crystal.

Opacity

opens up rooms, a showcase  
for the hueless moonflower  
corolla, as Georgia  
O'Keefe might have seen it,  
of foghorns; the nodding  
campanula of bell buoys;  
the ticking, linear  
filigree of bird voices.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Gradual Clearing

Late in the day the fog  
wrung itself out like a sponge  
in glades of rain,  
sieving the half-invisible  
cove with speartips;  
then, in a lifting  
of wisps and scarves, of smoke-rings  
from about the islands, disclosing  
what had been wavering  
fishnet plissé as a smoothness  
of peau-de-soie or just-ironed  
percale, with a tatting  
of foam out where the rocks are,  
the sheened no-color of it,  
the bandings of platinum  
and magnesium suffusing,  
minute by minute, with clandestine  
rose and violet, with opaline  
nuance of milkweed, a texture  
not to be spoken of above a whisper,  
began, all along the horizon,  
gradually to unseal  
like the lip of a cave  
or of a cavernous,  
single, pearl-  
engendering seashell.

Amy Clampitt

## Nothing Stays Put

In memory of Father Flye, 1884-1985

The strange and wonderful are too much with us.  
The protea of the antipodes—a great,  
globed, blazing honeybee of a bloom—  
for sale in the supermarket! We are in  
our decadence, we are not entitled.  
What have we done to deserve  
all the produce of the tropics—  
this fiery trove, the largesse of it  
heaped up like cannonballs, these pineapples, bossed  
and crested, standing like troops at attention,  
these tiers, these balconies of green, festoons  
grown sumptuous with stoop labor?

The exotic is everywhere, it comes to us  
before there is a yen or a need for it. The green-  
grocers, uptown and down, are from South Korea.  
Orchids, opulence by the pailful, just slightly  
fatigued by the plane trip from Hawaii, are  
disposed on the sidewalks; alstroemerias, freesias  
fattened a bit in translation from overseas; gladioli  
likewise estranged from their piercing ancestral crimson;  
as well as, less altered from the original blue cornflower  
of the roadsides and railway embankments of Europe, these  
bachelor's buttons. But it isn't the railway embankments  
their featherweight wheels of cobalt remind me of, it's

a row of them among prim colonnades of cosmos,  
snapdragon, nasturtium, bloodsilk red poppies,  
in my grandmother's garden: a prairie childhood,  
the grassland shorn, overlaid with a grid,  
unsealed, furrowed, harrowed and sown with immigrant grasses,  
their massive corduroy, their wavering feltings embroidered  
here and there by the scarlet shoulder patch of cannas  
on a courthouse lawn, by a love knot, a cross stitch  
of living matter, sown and tended by women,  
nurturers everywhere of the strange and wonderful,  
beneath whose hands what had been alien begins,  
as it alters, to grow as though it were indigenous.

But at this remove what I think of as  
strange and wonderful, strolling the side streets of Manhattan  
on an April afternoon, seeing hybrid pear trees in blossom,  
a tossing, vertiginous colonnade of foam, up above—  
is the white petalfall, the warm snowdrift  
of the indigenous wild plum of my childhood.  
Nothing stays put. The world is a wheel.  
All that we know, that we're  
made of, is motion.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## **On The Disadvantages Of Central Heating**

cold nights on the farm, a sock-shod  
stove-warmed flatiron slid under  
the covers, mornings a damascene-  
sealed bizarrerie of fernwork  
decades ago now

waking in northwest London, tea  
brought up steaming, a Peak Frea  
biscuit alongside to be nibbled  
as blue gas leaps up singing  
decades ago now

damp sheets in Dorset, fog-hung  
habitat of bronchitis, of long  
hot soaks in the bathtub, of nothing  
quite drying out till next summer:  
delicious to think of

hassocks pulled in close, toasting-  
forks held to coal-glow, strong-minded  
small boys and big eager sheepdogs  
muscling in on bookish profundities  
now quite forgotten

the farmhouse long sold, old friends  
dead or lost track of, what's salvaged  
is this vivid diminuendo, unfogged  
by mere affect, the perishing residue  
of pure sensation

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Salvage

Daily the cortege of crumpled  
defunct cars  
goes by by the lasagna-  
layered flatbed  
truckload: hardtop

reverting to tar smudge,  
wax shine antiqued to crusted  
winepress smear,  
windshield battered to  
intact ice-tint, a rarity

fresh from the Pleistocene.  
I like it; privately  
I find esthetic  
satisfaction in these  
ceremonial removals

from the category of  
received ideas  
to regions where pigeons'  
svelte smoke-velvet  
limousines, taxiing

in whirligigs, reclaim  
a parking lot,  
and the bag-laden  
hermit woman, disencumbered  
of a greater incubus,

the crush of unexamined  
attitudes, stoutly  
follows her routine,  
mining the mountainsides  
of our daily refuse

for artifacts: subversive  
re-establishing  
with each arcane  
trash-basket dig  
the pleasures of the ruined.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Syrinx

Like the foghorn that's all lung,  
the wind chime that's all percussion,  
like the wind itself, that's merely air  
in a terrible fret, without so much  
as a finger to articulate  
what ails it, the aeolian  
syrinx, that reed  
in the throat of a bird,  
when it comes to the shaping of  
what we call consonants, is  
too imprecise for consensus  
about what it even seems to  
be saying: is it o-ka-lee  
or con-ka-ree, is it really jug jug,  
is it cuckoo for that matter?&mdash;  
much less whether a bird's call  
means anything in  
particular, or at all.

Syntax comes last, there can be  
no doubt of it: came last,  
can be thought of (is  
thought of by some) as a  
higher form of expression:  
is, in extremity, first to  
be jettisoned: as the diva  
onstage, all soaring  
pectoral breathwork,  
takes off, pure vowel  
breaking free of the dry,  
the merely fricative  
husk of the particular, rises  
past saying anything, any  
more than the wind in  
the trees, waves breaking,  
or Homer's gibbering  
Thespesiae iache:

those last-chance vestiges  
above the threshold, the all-  
but dispossessed of breath.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## The Sun Underfoot Among The Sundews

An ingenuity too astonishing  
to be quite fortuitous is  
this bog full of sundews, sphagnum-  
lines and shaped like a teacup.

A step  
down and you're into it; a  
wilderness swallows you up:  
ankle-, then knee-, then midriff-  
to-shoulder-deep in wetfooted  
understory, an overhead  
spruce-tamarack horizon hinting  
you'll never get out of here.

But the sun  
among the sundews, down there,  
is so bright, an underfoot  
webwork of carnivorous rubies,  
a star-swarm thick as the gnats  
they're set to catch, delectable  
double-faced cockleburs, each  
hair-tip a sticky mirror  
afire with sunlight, a million  
of them and again a million,  
each mirror a trap set to  
unhand believing,  
that either  
a First Cause said once, "Let there  
be sundews," and there were, or they've  
made their way here unaided  
other than by that backhand, round-  
about refusal to assume responsibility  
known as Natural Selection.

But the sun  
underfoot is so dazzling  
down there among the sundews,  
there is so much light  
in that cup that, looking,  
you start to fall upward.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt

## Vacant Lot With Pokeweed

Tufts, follicles, grubstake  
biennial rosettes, a low-  
life beach-blond scruff of  
couch grass: notwithstanding  
the interglinting dregs

of wholesale upheaval and  
dismemberment, weeds do not  
hesitate, the wheeling  
rise of the ailanthus halts  
at nothing—and look! here's

a pokeweed, sprung up from seed  
dropped by some vagrant, that's  
seized a foothold: a magenta-  
girdered bower, gazebo twirls  
of blossom rounding into

raw-buttoned, garnet-rodded  
fruit one more wayfarer  
perhaps may salvage from  
the season's frittering,  
the annual wreckage.

Anonymous submission.

Amy Clampitt