

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Dana Gioia**

**- poems -**

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## California Hills in August

I can imagine someone who found  
these fields unbearable, who climbed  
the hillside in the heat, cursing the dust,  
cracking the brittle weeds underfoot,  
wishing a few more trees for shade.

An Easterner especially, who would scorn  
the meagerness of summer, the dry  
twisted shapes of black elm,  
scrub oak, and chaparral, a landscape  
August has already drained of green.

One who would hurry over the clinging  
thistle, foxtail, golden poppy,  
knowing everything was just a weed,  
unable to conceive that these trees  
and sparse brown bushes were alive.

And hate the bright stillness of the noon  
without wind, without motion.  
the only other living thing  
a hawk, hungry for prey, suspended  
in the blinding, sunlit blue.

And yet how gentle it seems to someone  
raised in a landscape short of rain—  
the skyline of a hill broken by no more  
trees than one can count, the grass,  
the empty sky, the wish for water.

Dana Gioia

## **Do Not Expect...**

Do not expect that if your book falls open  
to a certain page, that any phrase  
you read will make a difference today,  
or that the voices you might overhear  
when the wind moves through the yellow-green  
and golden tent of autumn, speak to you.

Things ripen or go dry. Light plays on the  
dark surface of the lake. Each afternoon  
your shadow walks beside you on the wall,  
and the days stay long and heavy underneath  
the distant rumor of the harvest. One  
more summer gone,  
and one way or another you survive,  
dull or regretful, never learning that  
nothing is hidden in the obvious  
changes of the world, that even the dim  
reflection of the sun on tall, dry grass  
is more than you will ever understand.

And only briefly then  
you touch, you see, you press against  
the surface of impenetrable things.

Dana Gioia

## Emigre in Autumn

Walking down the garden path  
From the house you do not own,  
Once again you think of how  
Cool the autumns were at home.  
Dressed as if you had just left  
The courtyard of the summer palace,  
Walk the boundaries of the park,  
Count the steps you take each day -  
Miles that span no distances,  
Journeys in sunlight toward the dark.

Sit and watch the daylight play  
Idly on the tops of leaves  
Glistening overhead in autumn's  
Absolute dominion.  
Nothing lost by you excels  
These empires of sunlight.  
But even here the subtle breeze  
Plots with underlying shadows.  
One gust of wind and suddenly  
The sun is falling from the trees.

Dana Gioia

## **Guide to the Other Gallery**

This is the hall of broken limbs  
Where splintered marble athletes lie  
Beside the arms of cherubim.  
Nothing is ever thrown away.

These butterflies are set in rows.  
So small and gray inside their case  
They look alike now. I suppose  
Death makes most creatures commonplace.

These portraits here of the unknown  
Are hung three high, frame piled on frame.  
Each potent soul who craved renown,  
Immortalized without a name.

Here are the shelves of unread books,  
Millions of pages turning brown.  
Visitors wander through the stacks,  
But no one ever takes one down.

I wish I were a better guide.  
There's so much more that you should see.  
Rows of bottles with nothing inside.  
Displays of locks which have no key.

You'd like to go? I wish you could.  
This room has such a peaceful view.  
Look at that case of antique wood  
Without a label. It's for you.

Dana Gioia

## **Insomnia**

Now you hear what the house has to say.  
Pipes clanking, water running in the dark,  
the mortgaged walls shifting in discomfort,  
and voices mounting in an endless drone  
of small complaints like the sounds of a family  
that year by year you've learned how to ignore.

But now you must listen to the things you own,  
all that you've worked for these past years,  
the murmur of property, of things in disrepair,  
the moving parts about to come undone,  
and twisting in the sheets remember all  
the faces you could not bring yourself to love.

How many voices have escaped you until now,  
the venting furnace, the floorboards underfoot,  
the steady accusations of the clock  
numbering the minutes no one will mark.  
The terrible clarity this moment brings,  
the useless insight, the unbroken dark.

Dana Gioia

## Money

*Money is a kind of poetry.*  
- Wallace Stevens

Money, the long green,  
cash, stash, rhino, jack  
or just plain dough.

Chock it up, fork it over,  
shell it out. Watch it  
burn holes through pockets.

To be made of it! To have it  
to burn! Greenbacks, double eagles,  
megabucks and Ginnie Maes.

It greases the palm, feathers a nest,  
holds heads above water,  
makes both ends meet.

Money breeds money.  
Gathering interest, compounding daily.  
Always in circulation.

Money. You don't know where it's been,  
but you put it where your mouth is.  
And it talks.

Dana Gioia

## **Pentecost**

*<i>After the death of our son</i>*

Neither the sorrows of afternoon, waiting in the silent house,  
Nor the night no sleep relieves, when memory  
Repeats its prosecution.

Nor the morning's ache for dream's illusion, nor any prayers  
Improvised to an unknowable god  
Can extinguish the flame.

We are not as we were. Death has been our pentecost,  
And our innocence consumed by these implacable  
Tongues of fire.

Comfort me with stones. Quench my thirst with sand.  
I offer you this scarred and guilty hand  
Until others mix our ashes.

Dana Gioia

## Planting A Sequoia

All afternoon my brothers and I have worked in the orchard,  
Digging this hole, laying you into it, carefully packing the soil.  
Rain blackened the horizon, but cold winds kept it over the Pacific,  
And the sky above us stayed the dull gray  
Of an old year coming to an end.

In Sicily a father plants a tree to celebrate his first son's birth--  
An olive or a fig tree--a sign that the earth has one more life to bear.  
I would have done the same, proudly laying new stock into my father's orchard,  
A green sapling rising among the twisted apple boughs,  
A promise of new fruit in other autumns.

But today we kneel in the cold planting you, our native giant,  
Defying the practical custom of our fathers,  
Wrapping in your roots a lock of hair, a piece of an infant's birth cord,  
All that remains above earth of a first-born son,  
A few stray atoms brought back to the elements.

We will give you what we can--our labor and our soil,  
Water drawn from the earth when the skies fail,  
Nights scented with the ocean fog, days softened by the circuit of bees.  
We plant you in the corner of the grove, bathed in western light,  
A slender shoot against the sunset.

And when our family is no more, all of his unborn brothers dead,  
Every niece and nephew scattered, the house torn down,  
His mother's beauty ashes in the air,  
I want you to stand among strangers, all young and ephemeral to you,  
Silently keeping the secret of your birth.

Dana Gioia

## Thanks for Remembering Us

The flowers sent here by mistake,  
signed with a name that no one knew,  
are turning bad. What shall we do?  
Our neighbor says they're not for her,  
and no one has a birthday near.  
We should thank someone for the blunder.  
Is one of us having an affair?  
At first we laugh, and then we wonder.

The iris was the first to die,  
enshrouded in its sickly-sweet  
and lingering perfume. The roses  
fell one petal at a time,  
and now the ferns are turning dry.  
The room smells like a funeral,  
but there they sit, too much at home,  
accusing us of some small crime,  
like love forgotten, and we can't  
throw out a gift we've never owned.

Dana Gioia

## **The Country Wife**

She makes her way through the dark trees  
Down to the lake to be alone.  
Following their voices on the breeze,  
She makes her way. Through the dark trees  
The distant stars are all she sees.  
They cannot light the way she's gone.  
She make her way through the dark trees  
Down to the lake to be alone.

The night reflected on the lake,  
The fire of stars changed into water.  
She cannot see the winds that break  
The night reflected on the lake  
But knows they motion for her sake.  
These are the choices they have brought her:  
The night reflected on the lake,  
The fire of stars changed into water.

Dana Gioia

## The Next Poem

How much better it seems now  
than when it is finally done—  
the unforgettable first line,  
the cunning way the stanzas run.

The rhymes soft-spoken and suggestive  
are barely audible at first,  
an appetite not yet acknowledged  
like the inkling of a thirst.

While gradually the form appears  
as each line is coaxed aloud—  
the architecture of a room  
seen from the middle of a crowd.

The music that of common speech  
but slanted so that each detail  
sounds unexpected as a sharp  
inserted in a simple scale.

No jumble box of imagery  
dumped glumly in the reader's lap  
or elegantly packaged junk  
the unsuspecting must unwrap.

But words that could direct a friend  
precisely to an unknown place,  
those few unshakeable details  
that no confusion can erase.

And the real subject left unspoken  
but unmistakable to those  
who don't expect a jungle parrot  
in the black and white of prose.

How much better it seems now  
than when it is finally written.  
How hungrily one waits to feel  
the bright lure seized, the old hook bitten.

Dana Gioia

## **The Sunday News**

Looking for something in the Sunday paper,  
I flipped by accident through Local Weddings,  
Yet missed the photograph until I saw  
your name among the headings.

And there you were, looking almost unchanged,  
Your hair still long, though now long out of style,  
And you still wore that stiff and serious look  
You called a smile.

I felt as though we sat there face to face.  
My stomach tightened. I read the item through.  
It said too much about both families,  
Too little about you.

Finished at last, I threw the paper down,  
Stung by jealousy, my mind aflame,  
Hating this man, this stranger whom you loved,  
This printed name.

And yet I clipped it out to put away  
Inside a book like something I might use,  
A scrap I knew I wouldn't read again  
But couldn't bear to lose.

Dana Gioia

## **Unsaid**

So much of what we live goes on inside—  
The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches  
Of unacknowledged love are no less real  
For having passed unsaid. What we conceal  
Is always more than what we dare confide.  
Think of the letters that we write our dead.

Dana Gioia

## **Veterans' Cemetery**

The ceremonies of the day have ceased,  
Abandoned to the ragged crow's parade.  
The flags unravel in the caterpillar's feast.  
The wreaths collapse onto the stones they shade.

How quietly doves gather by the gate  
Like souls who have no heaven and no hell.  
The patient grass reclaims its lost estate  
Where one stone angel stands as sentinel.

The voices whispering in the burning leaves,  
Faint and inhuman, what can they desire  
When every season feeds upon the past,  
And summer's green ignites the autumn's fire?

The afternoon's a single thread of light  
Sewn through the tatters of a leafless willow,  
As one by one the branches fade from sight,  
And time curls up like paper turning yellow.

Dana Gioia

## Words

The world does not need words. It articulates itself  
in sunlight, leaves, and shadows. The stones on the path  
are no less real for lying uncatalogued and uncounted.  
The fluent leaves speak only the dialect of pure being.  
The kiss is still fully itself though no words were spoken.

And one word transforms it into something less or other--  
<i>illicit, chaste, perfunctory, conjugal, covert</i>.  
Even calling it a kiss betrays the fluster of hands  
glancing the skin or gripping a shoulder, the slow  
arching of neck or knee, the silent touching of tongues.

Yet the stones remain less real to those who cannot  
name them, or read the mute syllables graven in silica.  
To see a red stone is less than seeing it as jasper--  
metamorphic quartz, cousin to the flint the Kiowa  
carved as arrowheads. To name is to know and remember.

The sunlight needs no praise piercing the rainclouds,  
painting the rocks and leaves with light, then dissolving  
each lucent droplet back into the clouds that engendered it.  
The daylight needs no praise, and so we praise it always--  
greater than ourselves and all the airy words we summon.

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