

Classic Poetry Series

Dana Gioia

- poems -

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Dana Gioia (December 24, 1950)

Michael Dana Gioia is an American writer, critic and poet. He retired early from his career as a corporate executive at General Foods to write full-time. From January 29, 2003, until January 22, 2009, he was chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), the U.S. government's arts agency, and has worked to revitalize an organization that had suffered bitter controversies about the nature of grants to artists in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In August 2011, Gioia became Judge Widney Professor of Poetry and Public Culture at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, California.

He has sought to encourage jazz, which he calls the only uniquely American form of art, to promote reading and performance of Shakespeare and to increase the number of Americans reading literature. Before taking the NEA post, Gioia was a resident of Santa Rosa, California, and before that, of Hastings-on-Hudson, New York.

Early Years

Michael Dana Gioia —his surname is pronounced "JOY-uh"— was born in Hawthorne, California, the son of Michael Gioia and Dorothy Ortez. His younger brother is jazz historian Ted Gioia. Gioia grew up in Hawthorne, "speaking Italian in a Mexican neighborhood", he said. His father was the son of immigrants from Sicily and his mother was a native Californian of Mexican heritage. He attended Junípero Serra High School in Gardena, California.

He earned his B.A. from Stanford University in 1973, an M.A. from Harvard University in 1975, and an M.B.A. from Stanford Business School in 1977. From 1971-73, he was editor of Sequoia Magazine and then its poetry editor from 1975-77.

After college, he joined General Foods Corporation and served as vice-president of marketing from 1977 to 1992. He was on the team that invented Jell-O Jigglers. From 1977-79, he was literary editor of Inquiry Magazine and served as its poetry editor from 1979-83. For the academic years 1986-89, he was a Visiting Writer at Wesleyan University.

Personal Life

On February 23, 1980, he and Mary Elizabeth Hiecke (born May 26, 1953) were married. They had three sons, Michael Jasper Gioia (who died in infancy); Michael Frederick "Mike" Gioia; and Theodore Jasper "Ted" Gioia. His poem Planting a Sequoia is based on his real experience of losing his newborn son soon after he was born.

Resignation from General Foods

In 1992, Gioia resigned from his position at General Foods to write full-time. But even while there he was writing and producing several books of poetry. He won the Frederick Bock Award for poetry in 1986. His 1991 poetry collection *The Gods of Winter* won the 1992 Poets' Prize. Gioia is classed as one of the "New Formalists", who write in traditional forms and have declared that a return to rhyme and more fixed meters is the new avant-garde. He is a particular proponent of accentual verse.

Writing Full Time

After becoming a full-time writer, Gioia also served as vice-president of the Poetry Society of America from 1992 and as music critic for *San Francisco* magazine from 1997. He also wrote the libretto of the opera *Nosferatu* (2001).

Gioia objects to how marginalized poetry has become in America. He believes that university English departments appropriated the field from the public:

The voluntary audience of serious contemporary poetry consists mainly of poets, would-be poets, and a few critics. Additionally, there is a slightly larger involuntary and ephemeral audience consisting of students who read contemporary poetry as assigned course work. In sociological terms, it is surely significant that most members of the poetry subculture are literally paid to read poetry: most established poets and critics now work for large educational institutions. Over the last half-century, literary bohemia had been replaced by an academic bureaucracy.

Poetry

It was as a poet that Gioia first began to attract widespread attention in the early 1980s, with frequent appearances in *The Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, and *The New Yorker*. In the same period, he published a number of essays and book reviews. Both his poetry and his prose helped to establish him as one of the leading figures in the New Formalist movement, which emphasized a return to traditional poetic techniques such as rhyme, meter, and fixed form, and to narrative and non-autobiographical subject matter.

As a result, *Daily Horoscope* (1986), his first collection, was one of the most anticipated and widely discussed poetry volumes of its time. Its contents—like those of the two subsequent collections that Gioia has thus far published—range widely in form, length and theme: traditional forms and free verse; lyrics, meditations, and mid-length narratives; deeply personal poems and poems drawn from myth, history, and the other arts. Among its more notable—and widely reprinted—pieces are "California Hills in August", "In Cheever Country", and "The Sunday News".

The Gods of Winter (1991) is in many ways a deeper and darker book than its predecessor. It contains "Planting a Sequoia", his most direct engagement of the tragic loss of his infant son, as well as two long dramatic monologues, "Counting the Children", in which an accountant has a disturbing interaction with a grotesque doll collection, and "The Homecoming", whose narrator explains his motivations for committing murder and the effects that his violent acts have had upon him. Simultaneously published in Britain, it is one of the few American volumes ever chosen as the main selection of the U.K. Poetry Book Society.

Gioia's third collection, *Interrogations at Noon* (2001) was the winner of the 2002 American Book Award. (It is surely no coincidence that each book's title contains a temporal reference, given the importance of time and its passing as a theme in Gioia's poetry.) Its varied contents include a suite of translations from the contemporary Italian poet Valerio Magrelli and two excerpts from Gioia's translation of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, amid many original poems in which contemplative and occasionally wistful notes predominate, as in the concluding stanza of "Summer Storm": "And memory

insists on pining / For places it never went, / As if life would be happier / Just by being different.”

His poetry has appeared in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*, and many other anthologies. They have been translated into French, German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Chinese, and Arabic. His poetry has been set to music, in styles ranging from classical to jazz and rock, by—among others—Ned Rorem, Dave Brubeck, Paquito D’Rivera, and Alva Henderson; song cycles based on his poems have been composed by Stefania de Kenessey, Lori Laitman, and Paul Salerni. Gioia has also written the libretti for the operas *Nosferatu* (2001; music by Alva Henderson) and *Tony Caruso’s Last Broadcast* (2005; music by Paul Salerni).

Gioia has received ten honorary doctorates, as of 2011. In 2005, Dana Gioia received the John Ciardi Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry. In 2010, Gioia was announced as the year’s recipient of the Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame, an honor traditionally given to an American Roman Catholic in recognition of outstanding service to the Church and to society. In 2008, Gioia was inducted into the College of Fellows of the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology.

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Poetry

Daily Horoscope (1986)
The Gods of Winter (1991)
Interrogations at Noon (2001)

Criticism

Can Poetry Matter? (1991)
Barrier of a Common Language: An American Looks at Contemporary British Poetry (Poets on Poetry) (2003)
Disappearing Ink: Poetry at the End of Print Culture (2004)

Translation

Eugenio Montale’s Motteti: Poem’s of Love (translator) (1990)
The Madness of Hercules (Hercules Furens) (translator). Included in *Seneca: The Tragedies, Volume II*, published by Johns Hopkins (1995)

Edited

New Italian Poets (editor, with Michael Palma) (1991)
Certain Solitudes: On the Poetry of Donald Justice (editor, with William Logan) (1998)
California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present (California Legacy) (editor, with Chryss Yost and Jack Hicks) (2003)
The Misread City: New Literary Los Angeles (editor, with Scott Timberg) (2003)

Contributor

My California: Journeys by Great Writers (contributor / 2004)

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

Litany

This is a litany of lost things,
a canon of possessions dispossessed,
a photograph, an old address, a key.
It is a list of words to memorize
or to forget—of amo, amas, amat,
the conjugations of a dead tongue
in which the final sentence has been spoken.
This is the liturgy of rain,
falling on mountain, field, and ocean—
indifferent, anonymous, complete—
of water infinitesimally slow,
sifting through rock, pooling in darkness,
gathering in springs, then rising without our agency,
only to dissolve in mist or cloud or dew.

This is a prayer to unbelief,
to candles guttering and darkness undivided,
to incense drifting into emptiness.
It is the smile of a stone Madonna
and the silent fury of the consecrated wine,
a benediction on the death of a young god,
brave and beautiful, rotting on a tree.

This is a litany to earth and ashes,
to the dust of roads and vacant rooms,
to the fine silt circling in a shaft of sun,
settling indifferently on books and beds.
This is a prayer to praise what we become,
'Dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return.'
Savor its taste—the bitterness of earth and ashes.

This is a prayer, inchoate and unfinished,
for you, my love, my loss, my lesion,
a rosary of words to count out time's
illusions, all the minutes, hours, days
the calendar compounds as if the past
existed somewhere—like an inheritance
still waiting to be claimed.

Until at last it is our litany, mon vieux,
my reader, my voyeur, as if the mist
steaming from the gorge, this pure paradox,
the shattered river rising as it falls—
splintering the light, swirling it skyward,
neither transparent nor opaque but luminous,
even as it vanishes—were not our life.

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

Prayer

Echo of the clocktower, footstep
in the alleyway, sweep
of the wind sifting the leaves.

Jeweller of the spiderweb, connoisseur
of autumn's opulence, blade of lightning
harvesting the sky.

Keeper of the small gate, choreographer
of entrances and exits, midnight
whisper travelling the wires.

Seducer, healer, deity or thief,
I will see you soon enough—
in the shadow of the rainfall,

in the brief violet darkening a sunset—
but until then I pray watch over him
as a mountain guards its covert ore

and the harsh falcon its flightless young.

Dana Gioia

Rough Country

Give me a landscape made of obstacles,
of steep hills and jutting glacial rock,
where the low-running streams are quick to flood
the grassy fields and bottomlands.

A place

no engineers can master—where the roads
must twist like tendrils up the mountainside
on narrow cliffs where boulders block the way.
Where tall black trunks of lightning-scalded pine
push through the tangled woods to make a roost
for hawks and swarming crows.

And sharp inclines

where twisting through the thorn-thick underbrush,
scratched and exhausted, one turns suddenly
to find an unexpected waterfall,
not half a mile from the nearest road,
a spot so hard to reach that no one comes—
a hiding place, a shrine for dragonflies
and nesting jays, a sign that there is still
one piece of property that won't be owned.

Dana Gioia

Summer Storm

We stood on the rented patio
While the party went on inside.
You knew the groom from college.
I was a friend of the bride.

We hugged the brownstone wall behind us
To keep our dress clothes dry
And watched the sudden summer storm
Floodlit against the sky.

The rain was like a waterfall
Of brilliant beaded light,
Cool and silent as the stars
The storm hid from the night.

To my surprise, you took my arm—
A gesture you didn't explain—
And we spoke in whispers, as if we two
Might imitate the rain.

Then suddenly the storm receded
As swiftly as it came.
The doors behind us opened up.
The hostess called your name.

I watched you merge into the group,
Aloof and yet polite.
We didn't speak another word
Except to say goodnight.

Why does that evening's memory
Return with this night's storm—
A party twenty years ago,
Its disappointments warm?

There are so many might have beens,
What ifs that won't stay buried,
Other cities, other jobs,
Strangers we might have married.

And memory insists on pining
For places it never went,
As if life would be happier
Just by being different.

Dana Gioia

Sunday Night in Santa Rosa

The carnival is over. The high tents,
the palaces of light, are folded flat
and trucked away. A three-time loser yanks
the Wheel of Fortune off the wall. Mice
pick through the garbage by the popcorn stand.
A drunken giant falls asleep beside
the juggler, and the Dog-Faced Boy sneaks off
to join the Serpent Lady for the night.
Wind sweeps ticket stubs along the walk.
The Dead Man loads his coffin on a truck.
Off in a trailer by the parking lot
the radio predicts tomorrow's weather
while a clown stares in a dressing mirror,
takes out a box, and peels away his face.

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 Burning Ladder

Jacob
never climbed the ladder
burning in his dream. Sleep
pressed him like a stone
in the dust,
and when
he should have risen
like a flame to join
that choir, he was sick
of travelling,
and closed
his eyes to the Seraphim
ascending, unconscious
of the impossible distances
between their steps,
missed
them mount the brilliant
ladder, slowly disappearing
into the scattered light
between the stars,
slept
through it all, a stone
upon a stone pillow,
shivering, Gravity
always greater than desire.

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 Lost Garden

If ever we see those gardens again,
The summer will be gone—at least our summer.
Some other mockingbird will concertize
Among the mulberries, and other vines
Will climb the high brick wall to disappear.

How many footpaths crossed the old estate—
The gracious acreage of a grander age—
So many trees to kiss or argue under,
And greenery enough for any mood.
What pleasure to be sad in such surroundings.

At least in retrospect. For even sorrow
Seems bearable when studied at a distance,
And if we speak of private suffering,
The pain becomes part of a well-turned tale
Describing someone else who shares our name.

Still, thinking of you, I sometimes play a game.
What if we had walked a different path one day,
Would some small incident have nudged us elsewhere
The way a pebble tossed into a brook
Might change the course a hundred miles downstream?

The trick is making memory a blessing,
To learn by loss the cool subtraction of desire,
Of wanting nothing more than what has been,
To know the past forever lost, yet seeing
Behind the wall a garden still in blossom.

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.

Dana Gioia