

Classic Poetry Series

**John Williams**  
**- poems -**

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# John Williams(29 August 1922 - 3 March 1994)

John Edward Williams was an American author, editor and professor. He was best known for his novels *Stoner* (1965) and *Augustus* (1972).The latter won a U.S. National Book Award.

<b>Life</b>

Williams was raised in northeast Texas. His grandparents were farmers; his stepfather was a janitor in a post office. Despite a talent for writing and acting, Williams flunked out of a local junior college after his first year. He worked with newspapers and radio stations in the Southwest for a year, then reluctantly joined the war effort by enlisting in the United States Army Air Forces early in 1942, spending two and a half years as a sergeant in India and Burma. During his enlistment, he wrote a draft of his first novel, which was published in 1948.

At the end of the war Williams moved to Denver, Colorado and enrolled in the University of Denver, receiving Bachelor of Arts (1949) and Master of Arts (1950) degrees. During his time at University of Denver his first two books were published, *Nothing But the Night* (1948), a novel depicting the terror and waywardness resulting from an early traumatic experience, and *The Broken Landscape* (1949), a collection of poetry. Upon completing his MA Williams enrolled at the University of Missouri, teaching and working on his Ph.D. in English Literature, which he obtained in 1954. In the fall of 1955 Williams returned to the University of Denver as Assistant Professor, becoming director of the creative writing program. His second novel, *Butcher's Crossing* (Macmillan, 1960) depicts frontier life in 1870's Kansas. He edited and wrote the introduction for the anthology *English Renaissance Poetry* in 1963. His second book of poems, *The Necessary Lie* (1965), was issued by Verb Publications. He was the founding editor of the *University of Denver Quarterly* (later *Denver Quarterly*), which was first issued in 1965. He remained as editor until 1970.

Williams' third novel, *Stoner*, the fictional tale of a University of Missouri English professor, was published by Viking Press in 1965. His fourth novel, *Augustus* (Viking, 1972), a rendering of the violent times of Augustus Caesar in Rome, remains in print. It shared the National Book Award for Fiction with *Chimera* by John Barth, the first time that award was split.

Stone retiring from the University of Denver in 1985 and died of respiratory failure in 1994, at home in Fayetteville, Arkansas, survived by his wife and descendants. A fifth novel, *The Sleep of Reason*, was unfinished at the time of his

death.

Williams loved the study of literature. In a 1985 interview he was asked, "And literature is written to be entertaining?" to which he replied emphatically, "Absolutely. My God, to read without joy is stupid."

**Reviews**

Critic Morris Dickstein noted that, while *Butcher's Crossing*, *Stoner*, and *Augustus* are "strikingly different in subject," they "show a similar narrative arc: a young man's initiation, vicious male rivalries, subtler tensions between men and women, fathers and daughters, and finally a bleak sense of disappointment, even futility." Dickstein called *Stoner* "something rarer than a great novel — it is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, it takes your breath away."

In his introduction to *Stoner*, author John McGahern wrote, "There is entertainment of a very high order to be found in *Stoner*, what Williams himself describes as 'an escape into reality' as well as pain and joy. The clarity of the prose is in itself an unadulterated joy."

# A Benediction Of The Air

In every presence there is absence.

When we're together, the spaces between  
Threaten to enclose our bodies  
And isolate our spirits.  
The mirror reflects what we are not,  
And we wonder if our mate  
Suspects a fatal misreading  
Of our original text,  
Not to mention the dreaded subtext.  
Reality, we fear, mocks appearance.  
Or is trapped in a hall of mirrors  
Where infinite regress prevents  
A grateful egress. That is,  
We can never know the meaning  
Of being two-in-one,  
Or if we are one-in-two.  
What-I-Am is grieved at What-I'm-Not.  
What-We-Should-Be is numbed by What-We-Are.

Yes, I'm playing word games  
With the idea of marriage,  
Musing over how even we can  
Secularize Holy wedlock.  
Or to figure it another way,  
To wonder why two televisions  
In the same house seem natural symbols  
Of the family in decline.

Yet you are present to me now.  
I sense you keenly, at work,  
Bending red in face to reach  
A last defiant spot of yellow  
On those horrific kitchen cabinets.  
Your honey hair flecked with paint;  
Your large soft hidden breasts  
Pushing down against your shirt.  
The hemispheres of those buttocks  
Curving into uncompromising hips.

To embrace you would be to take hold  
Of my life in all its substance.

Without romance, I say that if  
I were to deconstruct myself  
And fling the pieces at random,  
They would compose themselves  
Into your shape.  
But I guess that is romantic,  
The old mystification-  
Cramming two bodies  
Into a single space.

Amen!

Our separation has taught me  
That, dwelling in mind,  
The corporeality  
Of mates has spiritual mass  
Which may be formulated:  
Memory times desire over distance  
Yields a bodying forth.  
Thus I project into the  
Deadly space between us  
A corposant, Pulsating a language  
That will cleave to you  
In the coolness of sleep  
With insubstantiality  
So fierce as to leave its dampness  
On the morning sheets,  
Or so gentle  
As to fan your brow  
While you paint the kitchen.  
A body like a breath,  
Whispering the axiom  
By which all religions are blessed:

In every absence there is presence.

Bene  
Bene  
Benedictus.

Submitted by David Shackelford

John Williams

# Ode To The Only Girl

I've seen you many times in many places--  
Theater, bus, train, or on the street;  
Smiling in spring rain, in winter sleet,  
Eyes of any hue in myriad faces;  
Midnight black, all shades of brown your hair,  
Long, short, bronze or honey-fair.  
Instantly have I loved, have never spoken;  
Slowly a truck passed, a light changed,  
A door closed--all seemingly pre-arranged--  
Then you were gone forever, the spell was broken.  
Ubiquitous only one, we've met before  
A hundred times, and we'll meet again  
As many more; in hills or forest glen,  
On crowded street or lonely, peaceful shore;  
Somewhere, someday--but how will we ever know  
True love, how will we ever know?

John Williams

# Swing Song

The blatant horns blare strident sound;  
Delighted, you laugh and seize  
My passive arm, but I have found  
Content in the harmonies.  
They sound, are silent; please or annoy,  
Are not clever, cruel, or coy  
Like human qualities.  
See agile fingers in frantic flight  
Along the smoking row  
Of piano keys cut from ebony night  
And from the sullied snow  
Of the city. Look love, listen love, tell me--  
Where does the music come from really,  
Where does it really go?  
Planets are tensed to a single chord  
Of absolute harmony  
Sounding from a cosmic keyboard,  
Unheard by you and me;  
Yet we re attuned; who understands  
That can see the judgment-hands  
Poised above the keys.

John Williams