Classic Poetry Series

John Williams

- 3 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.

Life

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."

Works:

Novels
Nothing But the Night (1948)
Butcher's Crossing (1960)
Stoner (1965)
Augustus (1972) —shared the National Book Award
Poetry
The Broken Landscape: Poems (1949)
The Necessary Lie (1965)

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.
Ubiquitios 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 wil 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