

Classic Poetry Series

**AM Juster
- poems -**

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AM Juster(1956 -)

After his secondary education at The Roxbury Latin School, Astrue earned a bachelor's degree from Yale University, where he served as President of the Yale Political Union, and a Juris Doctor degree from Harvard Law School.

Astrue, who previously served in the Social Security Administration as Counselor to the Commissioner, served in the US Department of Health and Human Services as General Counsel and as Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Legislation. He also served as Associate Counsel to the President of the United States at the White House in the Reagan and George Bush Sr administrations. In the private sector, he practiced law and was as a senior executive at several biotechnology companies.

Astrue was nominated as Commissioner of the Social Security Administration by President George W. Bush on September 14, 2006 and confirmed by the US Senate on February 2, 2007. He was sworn in on February 12, 2007 to serve a six-year term.

Poetry

In the June/July 2010 issue of First Things magazine, Astrue was profiled by poet Paul Mariani, who revealed him as the personage behind the pseudonym and anagram A. M. Juster, the poet and translator associated with New Formalism.

As Juster, Astrue has published a book of Petrarch translations, a translation of The Satires of Horace (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) , Longing for Laura (Birch Brook Press, 2001), and a book of original poetry, The Secret Language of Women (University of Evansville 2003). Juster was also the first moderator for Eratosphere, the largest on-line site for formal poetry.

2002 Richard Wilbur Award, for The Secret Language of Women selected by Rachel Hadas

Against Roses

A long eugenic past
reduces roses to
a vain and pampered caste.

Their charm is artifice,
their fragile shell of cells
unfit for wilderness.

Their languid symmetries
and anorexic airs
exalt deformities.

A run of blossoms, thick
and tangled by the road,
displays a truer pick.

Prefer the bindweed vines
that cannot stand alone
yet clench the mossy spines

of trees and grasp as tight
as nightmares or disease
while hoarding hints of light.

By cloning a delight,
obsessing towards some form,
we dull what should excite.

A rose bouquet contrives
to label wordless joy
when nothing true survives.

AM Juster

Cancer Prayer

Dear Lord,
Please flood her nerves with sedatives
and keep her strong enough to crack a smile
so disbelieving friends and relatives
can temporarily sustain denial.

Please smite that intern in oncology
who craves approval from department heads

Please ease her urge to vomit; let there be
kind but flirtatious men in nearby beds.

Given her hair, consider amnesty
for sins of vanity; make mirrors vanish.

Surround her with forgiving family
and nurses not too numb to cry. Please banish
trite consolations; take her in one swift
and gentle motion as your final gift.

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Into The Country Of The Gadarenes

Arthritic fingers of the olive trees
Accuse the sun of ancient injuries.

The shallows harden to an ochre crust
While bony cattle huddle in the dust.

The wretched one who tears his flesh resumes
His bellowing from somewhere in the tombs.

The sky assumes a tyrant's glare. Despite
Our lust for rain, we fear the eerie night.

Dogs whimper softly. An unearthly dawn
Ignites some whispers that the dead will yawn.

We spot a boat; pigs and children squeal.
We bicker over whether it is real.

A striking figure stands beside the sail.
His patchwork crew appears a little pale.

A crowd surrounds him as he steps ashore
But no one fears his coming anymore.

With all the noise, I cannot be exact
About what happened when the wretch attacked.

The visitor, from what my friends could tell,
Dazed his attacker with some kind of spell.

After berating unseen demons, he
Commanded them to set their hostage free.

We trembled as he spoke. He made a sign
And charged the demons to inhabit swine.

Immediately nearby pigs began
To froth and moan; the wretch became a man.

The pigs escaped; no one could make them stop.
The swineherds muttered, but then let it drop.

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Juice

Mulberries drop; tart purple rots to wine.
Plump sparrows celebrate and gorge like swine.
Perhaps their revelry should be delayed
Since cats appreciate a marinade.

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Long Strange Trip

The flower children gone to seed
Bake brownies for the PTA
And give to liberals in need.

Their ponytails display some gray
And nothing tie-dyed ever fits
Despite the tofu and sorbet.

Now they are mocked as "hippie-crits"
By free-range children who refuse
To heed their parents' tired views
On love and peace and endless summer.

What a bummer.

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Moscow Zoo

We saw the mass grave at the Moscow Zoo.
A sullen man dug up a human skull
Then held it high for journalists to view.
Forensic specialists arrived to cull
Remains and clues from this forgotten plot
On which the zoo still plans to cage a bear.
The experts guessed these prisoners were shot
For special reasons; no one was aware
Of comparable scenes at urban sites.
No one knew if these bones belonged to spies,
Suspected Jews or zealous Trotskyites,
So none of us displayed the least surprise
When bureaucrats emerged from quiet cars
To hint this might have been the work of czars.

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Note From Echo

Narcissus, I no longer haunt the canyons
and the crypts. I thrive and multiply;
uncounted daughters are my new companions.

We are the voicemail's ponderous reply
to the computers making random calls.
We are the Muzak in the empty malls,
the laughtrack on the reruns late at night,
the distant siren's chilling lullaby,
the steady chirp of things that simplify
their scheduled lives. You know I could recite
more, but you never cared for my recitals.

I do not miss you, do not need you here—
I can repeat the words of your disciples
telling lovers what they need to hear.

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Sunshine State

I dream the Florida of *Body Heat*
With Kathleen Turner twisting in her dress,
Wind chimes unsettling my sweaty sleep
And lovers marinating in deceit.

It is a place of sudden lusciousness
Where sheriffs know to bury bodies deep,
The trailer parks are called communities
And reptiles wait for opportunities.

As swamp gas rises near the local drive,
Old men debate an alien event.

I curse slow traffic off I-95
Though handmade signs remind me to repent.

Past reeds and strip-mall parking lots I drive,
Still wondering where Kathleen Turner went.

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To A Painting Of Echo

Foolish artist, why must you sketch my face
And hound a goddess eyes cannot detect?
I am the daughter born of Speech and Space,
Babble's mother, a voiceless intellect.
I snatch a word before it disappears
Then mimic mindlessly what I have found.
I am Echo--I live within your ears.
If you believe you can paint me, paint sound.

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Waiting

The other frogs consider me aloof
And mock each out-of-season mating call,
But I regard my plight as living proof
That faith can foster something magical.
So crouching patiently above the scum
With chin uplifted, eyelids low and still,
I wait for my redeeming love to come.

With numbing numbers cruelly reduced
To caviar for snacking perch and trout,
Dessert for weary birds before they roost
Or toys that idle boys have caught for sport,
It all confirms my sense of destiny.
Someday she will appear to grace this plot
And recognize the manifest in me.

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