

Poetry Series

John Ciardi
- poems -

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John Ciardi((-))

John Anthony Ciardi (June 24, 1916 – March 30, 1986) was an American poet, translator, and etymologist. While primarily known as a poet, he also translated Dante's *Divine Comedy*, wrote several volumes of children's poetry, pursued etymology, contributed to the *Saturday Review* as a columnist and long-time poetry editor, and directed the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference in Vermont. In 1959, Ciardi published a book on how to read, write, and teach poetry, *How Does a Poem Mean?*, which has proven to be among the most-used books of its kind. At the peak of his popularity in the early 1960s, Ciardi also had a network television program on CBS, *Accent*. Ciardi's impact on poetry is perhaps best measured through the younger poets whom he influenced as a teacher and as editor of *The Saturday Review*.

About The Teeth Of Sharks

The thing about a shark is—teeth,
One row above, one row beneath.

Now take a close look. Do you find
It has another row behind?

Still closer—here, I'll hold your hat:
Has it a third row behind that?

Now look in and...Look out! Oh my,
I'll never know now! Well, goodbye.

John Ciardi

Abundance

I

Once I had 1000 roses.
Literally 1000 roses.
I was working for a florist
back in the shambling 'Thirties
when iced skids of 250 roses
sold for \$2 at Faneuil Hall.
So for \$8 I bought
1000 roses, 500
white and 500 red,
for Connie's wedding to steadiness.

I strewed the church aisle whole
and the bride came walking
on roses, roses all the way:
The white roses and the red roses.
White for the bed we had shared.
Red for the bed she went to
from the abundance in her
to the fear in what she wanted.
The gift was not in the roses
but in the abundance of the roses.

To her

whose abundance had never wholly
been mine, and could never be his.
He had no gift of abundance in him
but only the penuries of sobriety.
A good steady clerk, most mortgageable,
returning in creaking shoes over
the white and the red roses. Returning
over the most flowering he would ever
touch, with the most flowering I
had ever touched. A feast of endings.

II

This morning I passed a pushcart
heaped with white carnations
as high as if there had fallen all night
one of those thick-flaked, slow, windless,
wondering snows that leave
shakos on fence posts, polar bears
in the hedges, caves in the light,
and a childhood on every sill.
Once, twice a year, partially,
and once, twice a lifetime, perfectly,

that snow falls. In which I ran
like a young wolf in its blood
leaping to snap the flower-flakes
clean from the air; their instant on the tongue
flat and almost dusty and not enough
to be cold. But as I ran, face-up,
mouth open, my cheeks burned
with tears and flower-melt,
and my lashes were fringed with gauze,
and my ears wore white piping.

There is no feast but energy. All men
know—have known and will remember
again and again—what food that is
for the running young wolf of the rare days
when shapes fall from the air
and may be had for the leaping.
Clean in the mouth of joy. Flat and dusty.
And how they are instantly nothing—
a commotion in the air and in the blood.
—And how they are endlessly all.

III

My father's grave, the deepest cave I know,
was banked with snow and lilies. We stuck the dead flowers
into the snow banks dirty with sand
and trampled by digger's boots.
The flowers, stiff and unbeckoning,
ripped from their wires in the wind

and blew their seasons out as snow
Purer than the snow itself. A last
abundance correcting our poverties.

I remember the feasts of my life,
their every flowing. I remember
the wolf all men remember in his blood.
I remember the air become
a feast of flowers. And remember
his last flowers whitening winter
in an imitation of possibility,
while we hunched black
in the dirtied place inside possibility
where the prayers soiled him.

If ever there was a man of abundances
he lies there flowerless
at that dirty center
whose wired flowers try and try
to make the winter clean again in air.
And fail. And leave me raging
as the young wolf grown
from his day's play in abundance
to the ravening of recollection.
Creaking to penury over the flower-strew.

IV

This morning I passed a pushcart
heaped beyond possibility,
as when the sun begins again
after that long snow and the earth
is moonscaped and wonderlanded
and humped and haloed in the
light it makes: an angel
on every garbage can, a god
in every tree, that childhood
on every sill.—At a corner of the ordinary.

Where is she now? Instantly nothing.
A penury after flower-strew. Nothing.

A feast of glimpses. Not fact itself,
but an idea of the possible in the fact.
—And so the rare day comes: I was again
the young wolf trembling in his blood
at the profusions heaped and haloed
in their instant next to the ordinary.
And did not know myself what feast I kept
—till I said your name. At once all plenty was.

It is the words starve us, the act that feeds.
The air trembling with the white wicks
of its falling encloses us. To be
perfect, I suppose, we must be brief.
The long thing is to remember
imperfectly, dirtying with gratitude
the grave of abundance. O flower-banked,
air-dazzling, and abundant woman,
though the young wolf is dead, all men
know—have known and must remember—
You.

John Ciardi

An Apartment With A View

I am in Rome, Vatican bells tolling
a windowful of God and Bernini.
My neighbor, the Pope, has died
and God overnight, has wept
black mantles over the sainted
stone age whose skirted shadows
flit through to the main cave.

I nurse a cold. It must be error
to sniffle in sight of holiness.
“Liquids,” the doctor said. He has
no cure, but since I have my choice,
I sip champagne. If I must sit
dropsical to Heaven, let me at least
be ritual to a living water.

In the crypt under the cave
the stone box in its stone row
has been marked for months now.
My neighbor knew where he was going.
I half suspect I, too, know,
and that it is nothing to sneeze at,
but am left to sneeze.

I drink my ritual Moët et Chandon
and wish (my taste being misformed
for the high authentic) I had
a California—a Korbel
or an Almaden. I like it “forward,”
as clerics of such matters say,
not schooled to greatness.

It is loud in Heaven today
and in the great stone school
my neighbor kept.
The alumni procession of saints
is forming for him. Bells
clobber the air with portents.
I sniffle and sneeze,

wad kleenex, and sip champagne,
trying to imagine what it might be
to take part in a greatness,
or even in the illusion
of something like. The experience
might deepen my character,
though I am already near

the bottom of it, among wads and butts
of what was once idea. And the last swallow
I do not like the after-taste, if that
is what I am tasting. But this is ritual.
I toast my neighbor: may he
find his glass, and may its after-taste
be all that he was schooled to.

John Ciardi

An Emeritus Addresses The School

No one can wish nothing.
Even that death wish sophomores
are nouveau-glib about
reaches for a change of notice.

"I'll have you know," it will say
thirty years later to its son,
"I was once widely recognized
for the quality of my death wish."

That was before three years
of navel-reading with a guru
who reluctantly concluded
some souls are bank tellers;

perhaps more than one would think
at the altitude of Intro. Psych.,
or turned on to a first raga,
or joining Polyglots Anonymous.

One trouble with this year's
avant-garde is that it has already
taken it fifty years to be behind
the avant-garde of the twenties

with the Crash yet to come.
And even free souls buy wives,
fall in love with automobiles,
and marry a mortgage.

At fifty, semisustained by bourbon,
you wonder what the kids see
in that Galactic Twang
they dance the Cosmic Konk to.

You will have forgotten such energy,
its illusion of violent freedoms.
You must suffer memory
to understanding in the blare

of a music that tires you.
There does come a death wish,
but you will be trapped by your
begetting, love what you have given,

be left waiting in a noise
for the word that must be whispered.
No one can wish nothing. You can
learn to wish for so little

a word might turn you
all the bent ways to love, its mercies
practiced, its one day at a time
begun and lived and slept on and begun.

John Ciardi

Bees And Morning Glories

Morning glories, pale as a mist drying,
fade from the heat of the day, but already
hunchback bees in pirate pants and with peg-leg
hooks have found and are boarding them.

This could do for the sack of the imaginary
fleet. The raiders loot the galleons even as they
one by one vanish and leave still real
only what has been snatched out of the spell.

I've never seen bees more purposeful except
when the hive is threatened. They know
the good of it must be grabbed and hauled
before the whole feast wisps off.

They swarm in light and, fast, dive in,
then drone out, slow, their pantaloons heavy
with gold and sunlight. The line of them,
like thin smoke, wafts over the hedge.

And back again to find the fleet gone.
Well, they got this day's good of it. Off
they cruise to what stays open longer.
Nothing green gives honey. And by now

you'd have to look twice to see more than green
where all those white sails trembled
when the world was misty and open
and the prize was there to be taken.

John Ciardi

High Tension Lines Across A Landscape

There are diagrams on stilts all wired together
Over the hill and the wind and out of sight.
There is a scar in the trees where they walk away
Beyond me. There are signs of something
Nearly God (or at least most curious)
About them. I think those diagrams are not
At rest.

I think they are a way of ciphering God:
He is the hugest socket and all his miracles
Are wired behind him scarring the hill and the wind
As the waterfall flies roaring to his city
On the open palms of the diagram.

There is
Shining, I suppose, in that city at night
And measure for miracles, and wheels whirling
So quick-silver they seem to be going backwards.
And there's a miracle already. But I
Went naked through his wood of diagrams
On a day of the rain beside me to his city.

When I kissed that socket with my wet lip
My teeth fell out, my fingers sprouted chives,
And what a bald head chewed on my sick heart!

John Ciardi

Lines

I did not have exactly a way of life
but the bee amazed me and the wind's plenty
was almost believable. Hearing a magpie laugh

through a ghost town in Wyoming, saying Hello
in Cambridge, eating cheese by the frothy Rhine,
leaning from plexiglass over Tokyo,

I was not able to make one life of all
the presences I haunted. Still the bee
amazed me, and I did not care to call

accounts from the wind. Once only, at Pompeii,
I fell into a sleep I understood,
and woke to find I had not lost my way.

John Ciardi

Men Marry What They Need

Men marry what they need. I marry you,
morning by morning, day by day, night by night,
and every marriage makes this marriage new.

In the broken name of heaven, in the light
that shatters granite, by the spitting shore,
in air that leaps and wobbles like a kite,

I marry you from time and a great door
is shut and stays shut against wind, sea, stone,
sunburst, and heavenfall. And home once more

inside our walls of skin and struts of bone,
man-woman, woman-man, and each the other,
I marry you by all dark and all dawn

and have my laugh at death. Why should I bother
the flies about me? Let them buzz and do.
Men marry their queen, their daughter, or their mother

by hidden names, but that thin buzz whines through:
where reasons are no reason, cause is true.
Men marry what they need. I marry you.

John Ciardi

Most Like An Arch This Marriage

Most like an arch—an entrance which upholds
and shores the stone-crush up the air like lace.
Mass made idea, and idea held in place.
A lock in time. Inside half-heaven unfolds.

Most like an arch—two weaknesses that lean
into a strength. Two fallings become firm.
Two joined abeyances become a term
naming the fact that teaches fact to mean.

Not quite that? Not much less. World as it is,
what's strong and separate falters. All I do
at piling stone on stone apart from you
is roofless around nothing. Till we kiss

I am no more than upright and unset.
It is by falling in and in we make
the all-bearing point, for one another's sake,
in faultless failing, raised by our own weight.

John Ciardi

Nothing Is Really Hard But To Be Real—

—Now let me tell you why I said that.
Try to put yourself into an experimental mood.
Stop right here and try to review everything
you felt about that line. Did you accept it
as wisdom? as perception? as a gem, maybe,
for your private anthology of Telling Truths?

My point is that the line is fraudulent.
A blurb. It is also relevant that I know
at least a dozen devoutly intellectual
journals that will gladly buy any fourteen
such lines plus a tinny rhyme scheme and
compound the felony by calling that a sonnet.

—Very well, then, I am a cynic. Though, for
the record, let me add that I am a cynic with
one wife, three children, and other invest-
ments. Whoever heard of a cynic carrying a
pack for the fun of it? It won't really do
I'm something else.

Were I to dramatize myself,
I'd say I am a theologian who keeps meeting
the devil as a master of make-up, and that
among his favorite impersonations he appears,
often as not, as the avuncular old ham who winks,
tugs his ear, and utters such gnomish garbage
as: "Nothing is really hard but to be real."

I guess what the devil gets out of this—if he is
the fool he seems to be—is the illusion of
imitating heaven. If, on the other hand, he is no
fool, then his deceptions are carefully practiced
and we are all damned. For all of us, unless
we are carefully warned, will accept such noises
as examples of the sound an actual mind makes.

Why are we damned then?—I am glad you asked that.
It is, as we say to flatter oafs, a good question.
(Meaning, usually, the one we were fishing for. Good.)

In any case. I may now pretend to think out the answer
I have memorized:

We are damned for accepting as
the sound a man makes, the sound of something else,
thereby losing the truth of our own sound.

How do we
learn our own sound? (Another good question. Thank you.)
—by listening to what men there have been and are
—by reading more poets than jurists (without scorning
Law)—and by reading what we read not for its
oration, but for its resemblance to that sound in which
we best hear most of what a man is. Get that sound into
your heads and you will know what tones to exclude.

—if there is enough exclusion in you to keep the
pie plates out of the cymbals, the tin horns out of
the brass section, the baling wire out of the strings,
and thereby to let the notes roll full to the ear
that has listened enough to be a listener.

As for the devil—when he has finished every imp-
ersonation, the best he will have been able to accomplish
is only that sound which is exactly not the music.

John Ciardi

Philosophical Poem

The disease of civilization is not tools, citizen.
Ignorance might be closer to it.
Politics closer. But only Money
Will hit the brass tacks everyone wants to get down to
Squarely on the head.

Above all, I have no case against human nature.
Whatever that is, I like it.
I like mechanics with wrenches,
Taxi drivers' photos on licenses,
Drunks lighting cigarettes.
What the hell else is there to like
After you've kissed your wife and gone to sleep?

I like everything but important people being important.
And academic people being academic.
What I like least is bookkeepers
Spending their human eyes on accounts receivable,
Interest receivable, payment due, balance on hand.
And columns of soldiers marching.

John Ciardi

Port Of Aerial Embarkation

There is no widening distance at the shore—
The sea revolving slowly from the piers—
But the one border of our take-off roar
And we are mounted on the hemispheres.

Above the waning moon whose almanac
We wait to finish continents away,
The Northern stars already call us back,
And silence folds like maps on all we say.

Under the sky, a stadium tensed to cry
The ringside savage thrumming of the fights,
We watch our engines, taut and trained for sky,
Arranged on fields of concrete flowered with lights.

Day after day we fondle and repeat
A jeweler's adjustment on a screw;
Or wander past the bulletins to meet
And wander back to watch the sky be blue.

Somehow we see ourselves in photographs
Held in our hands to show us back our pride
When, aging, we recall in epitaphs
The faces just behind and to each side.

The nights keep perfect silence. In the dark
You feel the faces soften into sleep,
Or tense upon the fraught and falling arc
Of fear a boy had buried not too deep.

Finally we stand by and consciously
Measure the double sense of all our talk,
And, everyman his dramatist, anxiously
Corrects his role, his gesture, and his walk.

John Ciardi

Suburban

Yesterday Mrs. Friar phoned. 'Mr. Ciardi,
how do you do?' she said. 'I am sorry to say
this isn't exactly a social call. The fact is
your dog has just deposited-forgive me-
a large repulsive object in my petunias.'

I thought to ask, 'Have you checked the rectal grooving
for a positive I.D.?' My dog, as it happened,
was in Vermont with my son, who had gone fishing-
if that's what one does with a girl, two cases of beer,
and a borrowed camper. I guessed I'd get no trout.

But why lose out on organic gold for a wise crack
'Yes, Mrs. Friar,' I said, 'I understand.'
'Most kind of you,' she said. 'Not at all,' I said.
I went with a spade. She pointed, looking away.
'I always have loved dogs,' she said, 'but really!'

I scooped it up and bowed. 'The animal of it.
I hope this hasn't upset you, Mrs. Friar.'
'Not really,' she said, 'but really!' I bore the turd
across the line to my own petunias
and buried it till the glorious resurrection

when even these suburbs shall give up their dead.

John Ciardi

The Catalpa

The catalpa's white week is ending there
in its corner of my yard. It has its arms full
of its own flowering now, but the least air
spills off a petal and a breeze lets fall
whole coronations. There is not much more
of what this is. Is every gladness quick?
That tree's a nuisance, really. Long before
the summer's out, its beans, long as a stick,
will start to shed. And every year one limb
cracks without falling off and hangs there dead
till I get up and risk my neck to trim
what it knows how to lose but not to shed.
I keep it only for this one white pass.
The end of June's its garden; July, its Fall;
all else, the world remembering what it was
in the seven days of its visible miracle.

What should I keep if averages were all?

John Ciardi

The Dolls

Night after night forever the dolls lay stiff
by the children's dreams. On the goose-feathers of the rich,
on the straw of the poor, on the gypsy ground—
wherever the children slept, dolls have been found
in the subsoil of the small loves stirred again
by the Finders After Everything. Down lay
the children by their hanks and twists. Night after night
grew over imagination. The fuzzies shed, the bright
buttons fell out of the heads, arms ripped, and down
through goose-feathers, straw; and the gypsy ground
the dolls sank, and some—the fuzziest and most loved
changed back to string and dust, and the dust moved
dream-puffs round the Finders' boots as they dug,
sieved, brushed, and came on a little clay dog,
and a little stone man, and a little bone girl, that had kept
their eyes wide open forever, while all the children slept.

John Ciardi

The Pilot In The Jungle

Machine stitched rivets ravel on a tree
Whose name he does not know. Left in the sky,
He dangles from a silken cumulus
(Stork's bundle upside down
On the delivering wind) and sees unborn
Incredible jungles of the lizard's eye:
Dark fern, dark river, a shale coliseum
Mountained above one smudgepot in the trees
That was his surreal rug on metered skies
And slid afire into this fourth dimension
Whose infinite point of meeting parallels
He marks in ultra-space, suspended from
The chords of fifty centuries
Descending to their past—a ripping sound
That snags him limb by limb. He tears and falls
Louder than any fruit dropped from the trees,
And finds himself in mud on hands and knees.

II

The opened buckle frees him from his times.
He walks three paces dressed in dripping fleece
And tears it off. The great bird of his chute
Flaps in the trees: he salvages its hide
And starts a civilization. He has a blade,
Seventeen matches, his sheepskin, and his wits.
Spaceman Crusoe at the wreck of time,
He ponders unseen footprints of his fear.
No-eyes watch his nothing deep in nowhere.

III

He finds the wreck (the embers of himself)
Salvages bits of metal, bakelite, glass—
Dials twisted from himself, his poverty.
Three hours from time still ticking on his wrist
The spinning bobbins of the time machine

Jam on an afternoon of Genesis
And flights of birds blow by like calendars
From void to void. Did worlds die or did he?
He studies twisted props of disbelief
Wondering what ruin to touch. He counts his change
("Steady now, steady ...") flips heads or tails and sees
The coin fall into roots. An omen? ("Steady ...")
He laughs (a nerve's slow tangling like a vine)
Speaks to himself, shouts, listens, hears a surf
Of echo rolling back to strand him there
In tide pools of dead time by caves of fear,
And enters to himself, denned in his loss,
Tick-tick, a bloodbeat building on his wrist,
Ratcheting down the dead teeth of a skull
(The fossil of himself) sucked out of sight
Past heads and tails, past vertebrae and gill
To bedrocks out of time, with time to kill.

John Ciardi

White Heron

What lifts the heron leaning on the air
I praise without a name. A crouch, a flare,
a long stroke through the cumulus of trees,
a shaped thought at the sky - then gone. O rare!
Saint Francis, being happiest on his knees,
would have cried Father! Cry anything you please□

But praise. By any name or none. But praise
the white original burst that lights
the heron on his two soft kissing kites.
When saints praise heaven lit by doves and rays,
I sit by pond scums till the air recites
It's heron back. And doubt all else. But praise.

John Ciardi

Why Nobody Pets The Lion At The Zoo

The morning that the world began
The Lion growled a growl at Man.

And I suspect the Lion might
(If he'd been closer) have tried a bite.

I think that's as it ought to be
And not as it was taught to me.

I think the Lion has a right
To growl a growl and bite a bite.

And if the Lion bothered Adam,
He should have growled right back at 'im.

The way to treat a Lion right
Is growl for growl and bite for bite.

True, the Lion is better fit
For biting than for being bit.

But if you look him in the eye
You'll find the Lion's rather shy.

He really wants someone to pet him.
The trouble is: his teeth won't let him.

He has a heart of gold beneath
But the Lion just can't trust his teeth.

John Ciardi