

Classic Poetry Series

Jonathan Galassi
- poems -

Publication Date:
2012

Publisher:
Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Jonathan Galassi(1946)

Jonathan Galassi was born in Seattle, Washington, is the President and Publisher of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, one of the eight major publishers in New York. He began his publishing career at Houghton Mifflin in Boston, moved to Random House in New York, and finally, to Farrar, Straus & Giroux. He joined FSG as executive editor in 1985, after being fired from Random House. Two years later, he was named editor-in-chief, and is now President and Publisher.

Galassi is also a translator of poetry and a poet himself. He has translated and published the poetic works of the Italian poets Giacomo Leopardi and Eugenio Montale. His honors as a poet include a 1989 Guggenheim Fellowship, and his activities include having been poetry editor for The Paris Review for ten years, and being an honorary chairman of the Academy of American Poets. He has published poems in literary journals and magazines including Threepenny Review, The New Yorker, The Nation and the Poetry Foundation website.

Galassi graduated from Phillips Exeter Academy where he became interested in poetry, writing and literature, and from Harvard College in 1971. He was a Marshall Scholar at Christ's College, Cambridge. He realized while attending Christ's College that he wanted a career in book publishing. Galassi was born in Seattle (his father worked as an attorney for the Justice Department), but he grew up in Plympton, Massachusetts. He lives in Brooklyn and is married to Susan Grace, and they have two daughters.

Flow

Down the path between the apples
through the maple grove of suicides
then left at the old wall
along the wire fence to the brook-
bank where narcissus noses
into skunk cabbage and hepatica:
Call me Apollo, crashing in the underbrush
with my arrows, my bow saw and clippers
out for your flash of white tail and alert
to hack me a path to your lair, to your cult's den,
crisscrossing the water with Phoebe again and again
as it elbows below us and runs
for the creek racks
strongest in springtime when everything's liquid,
tightroping over the rocks
in the plashing braid, hot on your sharp
scent and battling the mayflies
the black flies horseflies mosquitoes
there under the raspberry brambles and getting no nearer . . .

Or am I fleeing your coiling uncoiling
tentacular embrace
battered and scarred, am I seeing
your fabled face in the oily pools,
are these fern hairs sprouting at your knuckles
branchbones, little leaves halving
our limbs with leaves—are they yours or mine?
Your bloodhounds bay at the copper
creek, your velvet cape's aloft
in the chiaroscuro breeze, you're near, nearer,
hieing, heying, I'm falling, failing,
gashed, gutted, kneed-up,
muddy and galled—call me
Actaeon....

Jonathan Galassi

Girlhood

If your bearded friend
helps you catch the trout
barehanded
in the pool of the dream
and you carry it in his pail
barefoot
up the rocky stream
to the playhouse where he fries it in his pan;
if you snip the dill
for the carrots and then swim
until your lips are bluer than the lake
where will it take you?
Not anywhere as pure
and primal as these sunstruck days
sistered by starstruck nights.
Don't cloud the drowning
brightness of your eyes,
don't answer my asking look
with anything but the truth,
don't spill the fresh-picked
raspberries on the car seat
and stain your shirt with indelible blood.

Or spill them, darling.
How else will you know
the color of crushed time;
how else will you feel
what it is to change and remember,
to lose and absorb
this summer inside you,
xylem and phloem of your leafy future
already starting to spread its shade above us?

Jonathan Galassi

Lunch Poem For F.S.

The dirty sunlight in the clerestory
windows of our faux-Parisian lair
lends a streaky, half-forgiving glow
to yet another summit with no purpose:
duck and iron Pinot Noir and double
decaf espresso, sheer necessities
for urban inmates who still keep the faith
with a wan cerise velvet banquette
and eye-level mirror lit with faces
a John-the-Baptist puritan might judge
corrupt with too much liquid happiness.
But it is happiness
to lounge in semi-silence while the day
downshifts and natter on about the shit
that passes for Shinola but we know
is only sauce for the gander.
It's not that we're against the war,
we're against them: the boobs, the pimps,
the Know-It-Alls, the True Believers—everyone
who isn't here awash in downtown gold
inhaling the exhaust of Burgundy . . .
Loafing, gloating, having it our way
Friday afternoon at Montrachet.

Jonathan Galassi

May

The backyard apple tree gets sad so soon,
takes on a used-up, feather-duster look
within a week.

The ivy's spring reconnaissance campaign
sends red feelers out and up and down
to find the sun.

Ivy from last summer clogs the pool,
brewing a loamy, wormy, tea-leaf mulch
soft to the touch

and rank with interface of rut and rot.
The month after the month they say is cruel
is and is not.

Jonathan Galassi

Middle-Aged

He was middle-aged which means that the mixture of death and life in him was still undetermined. And all of a sudden he took an unwarranted turn—impulsive, convulsive. As in those nineteenth-century plays where the roof gets blown off the conventional house and the audience is left to gape at the heroine bareheaded—him. He has a gift for self-serious hyperbole and he resorts to it regularly to describe and explain his behavior. Not that anything happened. But he stared into something, an abyss or a garden, and now in the aftermath he's more alone than before. He has not been forgiven, not that he wants to be. What he wants is to know what he saw, that it wasn't theatrics. But that's hard to achieve, things being what they are, the others implicated being themselves. So he walks in circles and wonders and kicks at the leaves.

Jonathan Galassi

Montale's Grave

Now that the ticket to eternity
has your name on it, we are here to pay
the awkward tribute post-modernity
allows to those who think they think your way

but hear you only faintly, filtered through
a gauze of echoes, sounding in a voice
that could be counterfeit; and yet the noise
seems to expand our notion of the true.

An ivory forehead, landscape drunk on light,
mother-of-pearl that flashes in the night:
intimations of the miracle
when the null steps forward as the all—

these were signals, sparks that spattered from
the anvil of illusions where you learned
the music of a generation burned
by an old myth: the end that will not come.

There is no other myth. This sun-drenched yard
proves it, freighted with the waiting dead,
where votive plastic hyacinths relay
the promise of one more technicolor day

—the promise that is vouchsafed to you, scribe,
and your dictator, while your names get blurred
with all the others, like your hardest word
dissolving in the language of the tribe.

Jonathan Galassi

North Of Childhood

FOR B.

Somewhere ahead I see you
watching something out your window,
what I don't know. You're tall,
not on your tiptoes, green,
no longer yellow,
no longer little, little one,
but the changeless changing
seasons are still with us.
Summer's back,
so beautiful it always reeks of ending,
and now its breeze is stirring
in your room commanding the lawn,
trying to wake you to say the day is wasting,
but you're north of childhood now and out of here,
and I've gone south.

Jonathan Galassi

Saving Minutes

You were in bed.
You heard your mother working in the kitchen.
It was still light, the birds were bickering,
the waterfall behind the house was falling.
Its rushing lulled you,
you loved the moment you lay in,
and you counted the time
from this instant

to this,
and put it away
to be lived on another night,
your wedding night or some other night
that needed all the luck,
all the saved-up minutes you could bring it.

Later you filled bottles in the stream
and dated them and stored them in a cupboard.
Months after, you retrieved them
to stare at what time had done.
You were eight, but already you knew
it was working on you,
each minute you passed through was gone.
You didn't want to give up your old clothes.
You'd watch your mother wrap
your dresses in a box for another girl
and know that where their stripes and buttons went
what you'd lived in them followed.

But those minutes in bed,
minutes of utter safety,
you heard the water falling
and didn't want it to fall.
You wanted to keep it,
you saved yourself that minute.
I don't know if you still have it
or if you've had to spend it
on you or on me.
But I know you still save minutes

I used to think went unwatched
into our account in time
that allows no withdrawals.
You hold onto the slippers and letters,
things that are leaving, things we've left,
evidence we're judged unfairly by.
You have the picture, you and Pam in blue
fishing in the stream below the pool,
staring back at the camera half-abashed.
Your jacket is still in the closet.
You never wear it,
you don't even remember when you did,
but it's here to testify
the picture doesn't lie
—though the color's different,
your hair is shorter now,
and the water in the pool
is long gone downstream.

Jonathan Galassi

Thread

Heartworn happiness, fine line that winds
among the tapestry's old blacks and blues,
bright hair blazing in the theater,
red hair raving in the bar—as now
the little leaves shoot veils of gold
across the trees' bones, shroud of spring,
ghost of summer, shadblow snow, blood-
russet spoor spilled prodigal on last year's leaves . . .
When your yellows, greens, and yellow-greens,
your ochres and your umbers have evolved
nearly to hemlock blackness, cypress blackness,
when the woods are rife with soddenness
(unfolded ferns, skunk cabbage by the stream,
barberry by the trunks, and bitter
watercress inside the druid pool)
will your thin, still-glinting thread insist
to catch the eye in filigreed titrations
stitched along among beneath the branches,
in the branches where it lives all winter,
occulted fire, brief constant fleeting gold . . .

Jonathan Galassi

Tinsel Tinsel

for M.C.

A fool for love, an inner refugee,
sees a peacock strutting in the birdhouse
high on a branch and fanning
the broadest, most articulated fan tail
the fool for love has ever seen.

"Come fly with me!" the fool calls to the peacock,
but the bright bird keeps strutting up and down
above the fool for love there on the ground.

A blackbird comes and settles on his shoulder.
His pecks are rough caresses as he asks him,
"Why do you keep staring at that tree?"
"Peacock!" the fool for love cries, but the blackbird
caws back, "Fool! Since when do peacocks fly?
Look around the birdhouse: see us towhees,
wrens and jays and blackbirds
flittering and swooping—
what we always do for free."

All the fool can do is stare.
His neck is permanently out of whack;
he doesn't care.
But one fine day in slanted light
he glances up as usual and spies
not his darling bird of paradise
but a hank of Christmas tinsel
trailing in the birdhouse breeze . . .

Even so he often murmurs,
"Peacock!" in his haunted dreams.
Ask me why, the reason's simple:
he's a fool for love, blackbirds
are blackbirds, peacocks peacocks,
tinsel tinsel.

Jonathan Galassi

Turning Forty

The barroom mirror lit up with our wives
has faded to a loaded-to-the-gills
Japanese subcompact, little lives
asleep behind us, heading for the hills

in utter darkness through invisible
countryside we know by heart by light;
but woods that are humane and hospitable
often turn eerie on a moonless night.

Our talk is quiet: the week's triumphs, failings,
gossip, memories—but largely fears.
In our brief repertoire of poses ailing's
primary, and more so with the years

now every step seems haunted by the future,
not only ours, but all that they will face:
a stricter world, with scarceness for a teacher,
bad air, bad water, no untrammelled space

or so it seems to us, after the Fall,
but for the young the world is always new.
Maybe that's what dates us worst of all
and saves them: What we'll miss they never knew.

We're old enough now to be old enough,
to know what loss is—not just hair and breath;
each has eyeballed reality by now:
a rift, a failure, or a major death.

They landed on us; we were not consulted,
although our darkest yearnings aren't so deep.
Let's tick off the short wish list of adulthood:
sleep, honor, sleep, love, riches, sleep, and sleep . . .

and camaraderie, that warms the blood,
the mildest, most forgiving form of love.
In an uncertain world a certain good
is one who'll laugh off what you're leery of.

That's why we're out here, racing with the clock
through cold and darkness: so that, glass in hand,
we'll face our half-life, padded for the shock
by a few old souls who understand.

Now the odometer, uncompromising,
shows all its nines' tails hanging in the air.
Now an entire row of moons is rising,
rising, rising, risen—we are there:

Total Maturity. The trick is how
to amortize remorse, desire, and dread.
Eyes ahead, companions: Life is Now.
The serious years are opening ahead.

Jonathan Galassi

Young

I tried, and each attempt was a fiasco.
I yearned, but every love of mine was wrong.
I needed, and the shame was overwhelming.
I failed, and so I hated being young.

Jonathan Galassi