

The Interior and the Other

Dana Levin and Ayelet Amittay

Poems for reading and analysis

1. Emily Dickinson:

"I felt a funeral in my brain" (J78) (F340)

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading— till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service like a Drum—
Kept beating— beating— till I thought
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space— began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing— then—

“After great pain, a formal feeling comes” (J122) (F372)

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way
Regardless grown
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—

This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First – Chill— then Stupor— then the letting go—

“One need not be a Chamber– to be Haunted–” (J274) (F407)

One need not be a Chamber– to be Haunted–
One need not be a House–
The Brain Has Corridors– surpassing
Material Place–

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than its interior Confronting–
That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a’chase–
Than Unarmed, one’s a’self encounter–
In lonesome Place–

Ourself behind ourself, concealed–
Should startle most–
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror’s least.

The Body– borrows a Revolver–
He bolts the Door–
O’erlooking a superior spectre–
Or More–

"A great Hope fell" (J424) (F1187)

A great Hope fell
You heard no noise
The Ruin was within
Oh cunning wreck that told no tale
And let no Witness in

The mind was built for mighty Freight
For dread occasion planned
How often foundering at Sea
Ostensibly, on Land

A not admitting of the wound
Until it grew so wide
That all my Life had entered it
And there were troughs beside

A closing of the simple lid
That opened to the sun
Until the tender Carpenter
Perpetual nail it down—

2. Louise Gluck, from *Averno*

FUGUE

1.

I was the man because I was taller.
My sister decided
when we should eat.
From time to time, she'd have a baby.

2.

Then my soul appeared.
Who are you, I said.
And my soul said,
I am your soul, the winsome stranger.

3.

Our dead sister
waited, undiscovered in my mother's head.
Our dead sister was neither
a man nor a woman. She was like a soul.

4.

My soul was taken in:
it attached itself to a man.
Not a real man, the man
I pretended to be, playing with my sister.

5.

It is coming back to me— lying on the couch
has refreshed my memory.
My memory is like a basement filled with old papers:
Nothing ever changes.

6.

I had a dream: my mother fell out of a tree.
After she fell, the tree died:
it had outlived its function.
My mother was unharmed— her arrows disappeared, her wings
turned into arms. Fire creature: Sagittarius. She finds herself in—

A suburban garden. It is coming back to me.

7.

I put the book aside. What is a soul?
A flag flown
too high on the pole, if you know what I mean.

The body
cowers in the dreamlike underbrush.

8.

Well, we are here to do something about that.

(In a German accent.)

9.

I had a dream: we are at war.
My mother leaves her crossbow in the high grass.

(Sagittarius, the archer.)

My childhood, closed to me forever,
turned gold like an autumn garden,
Mulched with a thick layer of salt marsh hay.

10.

A golden bow: a useful gift in wartime.

How heavy it was— no child could pick it up.

Except me: I could pick it up.

11.

Then was wounded. The bow
was now a harp, its string cutting
deep into my palm. In the dream

it both makes the wound and seals the wound.

12.

My childhood: closed to me. Or is it
under the mulch— fertile.

But very dark. Very hidden.

13.

In the dark, my sould said
I am your soul.

No one can see me; only you—
only you can see me.

14.
And it said, you must trust me.

Meaning: if you move the harp,
you will bleed to death.

15.
Why can't I cry out?

I should be writing *my hand is bleeding*,
feeling the pain and terror— what
I felt in the dream, as a casualty of war.

16.
It is coming back to me.

Pear tree. Apple tree.

I used to sit there, pulling the arrows out of my heart.

17.
Then my soul appeared. It said
just as no one can see me, no one
can see the blood.

Also: no one can see the harp.

Then it said
I can save you. Meaning
this is a test.

18.
Who is "you"? As in

"Are you tired of invisible pain?"

19.
Like a small bid sealed off from daylight:

that was my childhood.

20.

I was the man because I was taller.

But I wasn't tall—

didn't I ever look in a mirror?

21.

Silence in the nursery,
the consulting garden. Then:

What does the harp suggest?

22.

I know what you want—
you want Orpheus, you want death.

Orpheus who said "Help me find Eurydice."

Then the music began, the lament of the soul
watching the body vanish.

BLUE ROTUNDA

I am tired of having hands
she said
I want wings—

But what will you do without your hands
to be human?

I am tired of human
she said
I want to live on the sun—

Pointing to herself:

Not here.
There is not enough
warmth in this place.
Blue sky, blue ice

the blue rotunda
lifted over
the flat street—

And then, after a silence:

I want
my heart back
I want to feel everything again—

That's what
the sun meant: it meant
scorched—

*

It is not finally
interesting to remember.
The damage

is not interesting.
No one who knew me then

is still alive.

My mother
was a beautiful woman—
they all said so.

*

I have to imagine
everything
she said

I have to act
as though there is actually
a map to that place:

when you were a child—

*

And then:

I'm here
because it wasn't true; I

distorted it—

*

I want she said
a theory that explains
everything

in the mother's eye
the invisible
splinter of foil

the blue ice
locked in the iris—

*

Then:

I want it
to be my fault
she said
so I can fix it—

*

*Blue sky, blue ice,
street like a frozen river*

you're talking
about my life
she said

*

except
she said
you have to fix it

in the right order
not touching the father
until you solve the mother

*

a black space
showing
where the word ends

like a crossword saying
you should take a breath now

the black space meaning
when you were a child—

*

And then:

the ice
was there for your own protection

to teach you
not to feel—

the truth
she said

I thought it would be like
a target, you would see

the center—

*

Cold light filling the room.

I know where we are
she said
that's the window
when I was a child

That's my first home, she said
that square box—
go ahead and laugh.

Like the inside of my head:
you can see out
but you can't go out—

*

Just think
the sun was there, in that bare place

the winter sun
not close enough to reach
the children's hearts

the light saying
you can see out
but you can't go out

Here, it says,
here is where everything belongs

3. Dana Levin

THE BIRTH AND DEATH CORN

a ballad

Yesterday I went to see Jensen, and while I was on the table, he told me the story of the Birth and Death Corn. While he held the back of my head, probing my fucked up neck with his fingers. While I was coming off S.'s grief because J. left her, D.'s grief because R. left him, because D.'s father died and grief spun out reactive until he stood in tears at the bottom of my stairs. I'd had the laundry basket in one arm and D. in the other, he was about to vanish into a cell in Christ in the Desert, my Jewish Buddhist friend. And I was feeling so scared of walking into the future— when the present felt so dark and changed—

A couple he'd worked with. The mother in labor and the baby's heart stopping. The father so freaked out he called Jensen from the room where they were jumping the baby, trying to get it to start— *race race jump* and its battery going, "But the doctors aren't happy—" the father said to Jensen on the phone. Because the brain was long gone. By law, they'd have to keep it hooked up for four days, until damage could be itemized, asserted as fact— but everyone knew the soul-baby was gone, and they were tending a meat balloon.

The four days passed and they let the body go. And then— as he prodded my neck and moved my skull around like a cap shoved wrong on top of a bottle— they sowed her umbilical into the ground. Mixed with seed corn and the mother's placenta. And nine months later, when the new corn was ready, they mashed it with water, making a pulp— Jensen was there, he told me about it. While I lay there so scared of walking into the future, how the family gave everyone who'd gathered a cup— and, he said, everyone

drank her. They drank her, and to me it was the opposite of grief's black milk— they told stories about the soul-baby's lineage. How her spirit rode the stories like a current, how the drinking and the telling were the same. To be remembered, he said, and to nourish. And then he moved one hand

from my neck to my sacrum, and with the other pushed a finger deep into my belly, into the crossroad hole in my network of scars— once I'd been a baby who'd been born dying. And really, isn't that how each of us is born? Grow now, and die in the future. He told me about the Birth and Death Corn.

HOW TO HOLD THE HEAVY
WEIGHT OF NOW

She said, “You just made this gesture with your body—”
and opened her arms as if she could barely fit them
around an enormous ball—

“Make that shape again,” she said, and so I did. “Now
let it change,” she said, and I did—

slowly closing the space between my arms, fingertips
coverging until they touched—

I watched my hands turn together, align pinkie-side to
pinkie-side, I watched

my palms open, pushing gently forward, leading my
body forward, I watched them

let a bird go, I watched my hands
make

an offering—

HEROIC COUPLET

Out of range of North Korean missiles here in Saint Louis— I
looked on a map. Out of range, but not of the secondary ash
cloud, if the Yellowstone supervolcano explodes. Or the old
nuclear-waste dump meets underground landfill-fire a couple
of miles from the airport. Definitely in range of drought,
storm, flood, famine, pandemic, riot, economic collapse,
dirty bomb, mass shooting, rape, carjack, burglary, stroke,
heart attack, cancer, mechanical failures of various kinds—

*O Bomb in which all lovely things
moral and physical anxiously participate*

Thinking about Corso and Ginsburg being chased out of a
meeting of an antinuke group at Oxford by audience mem-
bers throwing shoes, because Corso read, “O Bomb I love
you / I want to kiss your clank eat your boom” “I want to
put a lollipop / in thy furcal mouth”— his poem saying, Why
fear Bomb? It’s just another kind of Death, which will come
for us all, generous friend—

#WeAreToast

But I’d wanted to write about feeling lost, before I woke
up thinking about the nation. How finally— when? A week
ago! Eons ago! Ten executive orders ago!-- at the end of my
session with Jensen, I said I’d felt for months like someone
had jammed a helmet and breastplate over me and I’d been
trying ever since to get it off. He said, “What if you’re not
supposed to take it off? What if you’re supposed to find a
sword to go with it?”

I felt the cogs of Era turn—
and had to pop a Klonopin—

4. Ayelet Amittay

THERAPY ROOM (FEBRUARY)

You have given me a new name.

You name the cluster of stars

that spell my suffering. I've never been

good at checking my blind spot

when I'm driving. How could I not

sense the ten-ton metal

shadow on my shoulder?

Diagnosis: a country impossible

to leave. The geography

has changed. You are trying

to spread the map across your knees.

From where I sit, it's hard to see.

COPAY

I surrender this portion. I pay it
the way I imagine the ancient Greeks

paid their tithes to stone all-seeing
Zeus: half a body

of cow, half my daily lot,
anointed in oil, smouldering or

charred. Will you remember me
by the increments of what I owed

you? I will remember you
by the way you taught me to recognize

butter light, kelp light, spinner
and canary light. Cloud-

hide-metal light. I can close
my eyes and your office lamp

is shedding its petals into your lap,

as if a hundred sunflowers

bowed their heads to your hands.

TO THE PILLS THAT WILL NOT SAVE ME

I swallow you in your white coat, chalk
molded in an oval. Numbered, neat
as whisky, kiss of geometry, stuck
in my throat like an overdone downbeat.
It's not what you do to me as much as
what you undo: Death is a porn star,
shuddering, coming in my mouth, the jizz
tasting of honeysuckle. So what if you are
a velvet rickroll of drugs where a poem
might have been. My brain is not a home.