

## AP English: Poems to Start the Year

“Sherbet” Cornelius Eady

The problem here is that  
This isn't pretty, the  
Sort of thing which  
Can be easily dealt with  
With words. After  
All it's  
A horror story to sit,  
A black man with  
A white wife in  
The middle of a hot  
Sunday afternoon at  
The Jefferson Hotel in  
Richmond, VA, and wait  
Like a criminal for service  
From a young white waitress  
Who has decided that  
This looks like something  
She doesn't want  
To be a part of. What poetry  
Could describe the  
Perfect angle of  
This woman's back as  
She walks, just so,  
Mapping the room off  
Like the end of a  
Border dispute, which  
Metaphor could turn  
The room more perfectly  
Into a group of  
Islands? And when  
The manager finally  
Arrives, what language  
Do I use  
To translate the nervous  
Eye motions, the yawning  
Afternoon silence, the  
Prayer beneath  
His simple inquiries,  
The sherbet which  
He then brings to the table personally,  
Just to be certain  
The doubt

Stays on our side  
Of the fence? What do  
We call the rich,  
Sweet taste of  
frozen oranges in  
This context? What do  
We call a weight that  
Doesn't fingerprint,  
Won't shift  
And can't explode?

“In Praise of Pain,” Heather McHugh

A brilliance takes up residence in flaws—  
a brilliance all the unchipped faces of design  
refuse. The wine collects its starlets  
at a lip's fault, sunlight where the nicked  
glass angles, and affection where the eye  
is least correctable, where arrows of  
unquivered light are lodged, where someone  
else's eyes have come to be concerned.

For beauty's sake, assault and drive and burn  
the devil from the simply perfect sun.  
Demand a birthmark on the skin of love,  
a tremble in the touch, in come a cry,  
and let the silverware of nights be flecked,  
the moon pocked to distribute more or less  
indwelling alloys of its dim and shine  
by nip and tuck, by chance's dance of laws.

The brightness drawn and quartered on a sheet,  
the moment cracked upon a bed, will last  
as if you soldered them with moon and flux.  
And break the bottle of the eye to see  
what lights are spun of accident and glass.

“God's Grandeur,” Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

“Blandeur,” Kay Ryan

If it please God,  
let less happen.  
Even out Earth's  
rondure, flatten  
Eiger, blanden  
the Grand Canyon.  
Make valleys  
slightly higher,  
widen fissures  
to arable land,  
remand your  
terrible glaciers  
and silence  
their calving,  
halving or doubling  
all geographical features  
toward the mean.  
Unlean against our hearts.  
Withdraw your grandeur  
from these parts.

“Return,” Martín Espada

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Forty years ago, I bled in this hallway.  
Half-light dimmed the brick  
like the angel of public housing.  
That night I called and listened at every door:  
in 1966, there was a war on television.  
Blood leaked on the floor like oil from the engine of me.  
Blood rushed through a crack in my scalp;  
blood foamed in both hands; blood ruined my shoes.  
The boy who fired the can off my head in the street  
pumped what blood he could into his fleeing legs.  
I banged on every door for help, spreading a plague  
of bloody fingerprints all the way home to apartment 14-F.  
Forty years later, I stand in the hallway.  
The dim angel of public housing is too exhausted  
to welcome me. My hand presses  
against the door at apartment 14-F  
like an octopus stuck to aquarium glass;  
blood drums behind my ears.  
Listen to every door: there is a war on television.

“Welcome to Hiroshima,” Mary Jo Salter

is what you first see, stepping off the train:  
a billboard brought to you in living English  
by Toshiba Electric. While a channel  
silent in the TV of the brain

projects those flickering re-runs of a cloud  
that brims its risen columnful like beer  
and, spilling over, hangs its foamy head,  
you feel a thirst for history: what year

it started to be safe to breathe the air,  
and when to drink the blood and scum afloat  
on the Ohta River. But no, the water's clear,  
they pour it for your morning cup of tea

in one of the countless sunny coffee shops  
whose plastic dioramas advertise  
mutations of cuisine behind the glass:  
a pancake sandwich; a pizza someone tops

with a maraschino cherry. Passing by  
the Peace Park's floral hypocenter (where  
how bravely, or with what mistaken cheer,  
humanity erased its own erasure),

you enter the memorial museum  
and through more glass are served, as on a dish  
of blistered grass, three mannequins. Like gloves  
a mother clips to coatsleeves, strings of flesh

hang from their fingertips; or as if tied  
to recall a duty for us, Reverence  
the dead whose mourners too shall soon be dead,  
but all commemoration's swallowed up

in questions of bad taste, how re-created  
horror mocks the grim original,  
and thinking at last They should have left it all  
you stop. This is the wristwatch of a child.

Jammed on the moment's impact, resolute  
to communicate some message, although mute,  
it gestures with its hands at eight-fifteen  
and eight-fifteen and eight-fifteen again

while tables of statistics on the wall

update the news by calling on a roll  
of tape, death gummed on death, and in the case  
adjacent, an exhibit under glass

is glass itself: a shard the bomb slammed in  
a woman's arm at eight-fifteen, but some  
three decades on—as if to make it plain  
hope's only as renewable as pain,

and as if all the unsung  
debasements of the past may one day come  
rising to the surface once again—  
worked its filthy way out like a tongue.

“An Elegy For My Mother in Which She Scarcely Appears,” Eavan Boland

I knew we had to grieve for the animals  
a long time ago: weep for them, pity them.  
I knew it was our strange human duty  
to write their elegies after we arranged their demise.  
I was young then and able for the paradox.  
I am older now and ready with the question:  
what happened to them all? I mean to those  
dumb old implements which have  
no eyes to plead with us like theirs,  
no claim to make on us like theirs? I mean—

there was a singing kettle. I want to know  
why no one tagged its neck or ringed the tin  
base of its extinct design or crouched to hear  
its rising shriek in winter or wrote it down with  
the birds in their blue sleeves of air  
torn away with the trees that sheltered them.

And there were brass firedogs which lay out  
all evening on the grate and in the heat  
thrown at them by the last of the peat fire  
but no one noted down their history or put them  
in the old packs under slate-blue moonlight.  
There was a wooden clotheshorse, absolutely steady  
without sinews, with no mane and no meadows  
to canter in, carrying, instead of  
landlords or Irish monks, rinsed tea cloths  
but still, I would have thought, worth adding to  
the catalogue of what we need, what we always need

as is my mother, on this Dublin evening of  
fog crystals and frost as she reaches out to test  
one corner of a cloth for dryness as the prewar  
Irish twilight closes in and down on the room  
and the curtains are drawn and here am I,  
not even born and already a conservationist,  
with nothing to assist me but the last  
and most fabulous of beasts—language, language—  
which knows, as I do, that it's too late  
to record the loss of these things but does so anyway,  
and anxiously, in case it shares their fate.