Sailing Home from Rapallo
by Robert Lowell
Your nurse could only speak Italian, but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week, and tears ran down my cheeks...

When I embarked from Italy with my Mother’s body, the whole shoreline of the Golfo di Genova was breaking into fiery flower. The crazy yellow and azure sea-sleds blasting like jack-hammers across the spumante-bubbling wake of our liner, recalled the clashing colors of my Ford. Mother traveled first-class in the hold; her Risorgimento black and gold casket was like Napoleon’s at the Invalides....

While the passengers were tanning on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs, our family cemetery in Dunbarton lay under the White Mountains in the sub-zero weather. The graveyard’s soil was changing to stone—so many of its deaths had been midwinter. Dour and dark against the blinding snowdrifts, its black brook and fir trunks were as smooth as masts. A fence of iron spear-hafts black-bordered its mostly Colonial grave-slates. The only “unhistoric” soul to come here was Father, now buried beneath his recent unweathered pink-veined slice of marble. Even the Latin of his Lowell motto: Occasionem cognosce,

seemed too businesslike and pushing here, where the burning cold illuminated the hewn inscriptions of Mother’s relatives: twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks. Frost had given their names a diamond edge....

In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother’s coffin, Lowell had been misspelled LOVEL. The corpse was wrapped like panettone in Italian tinfoil.
North Haven
by Elizabeth Bishop  in memoriam: Robert Lowell
I can make out the rigging of a schooner
a mile off; I can count
the new cones on the spruce. It is so still
the pale bay wears a milky skin, the sky
no clouds, except for one long, carded horse’s-tail

The islands haven’t shifted since last summer,
even if I like to pretend they have
— drifting, in a dreamy sort of way,
a little north, a little south or sidewise,
and that they’re free within the blue frontiers of bay.

This month, our favorite one is full of flowers:
Buttercup, Red Clover, Purple Vetch,
Hawkweed still burning, Daisies pied, Eyebright,
the Fragrant Bedstraw’s incandescent stars,
and more, returned, to paint the meadows with delight.

The Goldfinches are back, or others like them,
and the White-throated Sparrow’s five-note song,
pleading and pleading, brings tears to the eyes.
Nature repeats herself, or almost does:
repeat, repeat, repeat; revise, revise, revise.

Years ago, you told me it was here
(in 1932?) you first “discovered girls”
and learned to sail, and learned to kiss.
You had “such fun,” you said, that classic summer.
(“Fun— it always seemed to leave you at a loss…)

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
afloat in mystic blue… And now— you’ve left
for good. You can’t derange, or re-arrange,
your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
The words won’t change again. Sad friend, you cannot change.

Elegy with Apples, Pomegranates, Bees, Butterflies, Thorn Bushes, Oak, Pine, Warblers, Crows, Ants, and Worms
by Hayan Charara
The trees alongside the fence
bear fruit, the limbs and leaves speeches
to you and me. They promise to give the world
back to itself. The apple apologizes
for those whose hearts bear too much zest
for heaven, the pomegranate
for the change that did not come
soon enough. Every seed is a heart, every heart
a minefield, and the bees and butterflies
swarm the flowers on its grave.
The thorn bushes instruct us
to tell our sons and daughters
who carry sticks and stones
to mend their ways.
The oak tree says to eat
only fruits and vegetables;
the pine says to eat all the stirring things.
My neighbor left long ago and did not hear
any of this. In a big country
the leader warns the leader of a small country
there must be change or else.
Birds are the same way, coming and going,
wobbling thin branches.
The warblers express pain, the crows regret,
or is it the other way around?
The mantra today is the same as yesterday.
We must become different.
The plants must, the animals,
and the ants and worms, just like the carmakers,
the soap makers before them,
and the manufacturers of rubber
and the sellers of tea, tobacco, and salt.
Such an ancient habit, making ourselves new.
My neighbor looks like my mother
who left a long time ago
and did not hear any of this.
Just for a minute, give her back to me,
before she died, kneeling
in the dirt under the sun, calling me darling
in Arabic, which no one has since.

O Captain! My Captain!

by Walt Whitman, written after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.
O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
   But O heart! heart! heart!
   O the bleeding drops of red,
   Where on the deck my Captain lies,
   Fallen cold and dead.
O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
   Here Captain! dear father!
      This arm beneath your head!
         It is some dream that on the deck,
            You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
   Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
      But I with mournful tread,
         Walk the deck my Captain lies,
            Fallen cold and dead.

Elegy for Jane
My Student, Thrown by a Horse
by Theodore Roethke
I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils;
And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her,
And she balanced in the delight of her thought,
A wren, happy, tail into the wind,
Her song trembling the twigs and small branches.
The shade sang with her;
The leaves, their whispers turned to kissing,
And the mould sang in the bleached valleys under the rose.
Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,
Even a father could not find her:
Scraping her cheek against straw,
Stirring the clearest water.
My sparrow, you are not here,
Waiting like a fern, making a spiny shadow.
The sides of wet stones cannot console me,
Nor the moss, wound with the last light.
If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
I, with no rights in this matter,
Neither father nor lover.
Frankly
by Naomi Shihab Nye

No one has time for the dying.
And they don’t have time for us either.
Our lunch dates and appointments,
their fitful sleeps and crusted eyes.
Students circling in a parking lot
down the road certainly don’t have time.
First period coming too soon will scatter
clumps of flirtation.

Moms in fitness garb
with grocery lists and car pool numbers
stuck to refrigerators,
have too many of the living to pick up, drop off.

At the end we bore the dying,
our teary smiles, pitiful offerings.
Frank said, “If I could only get back
to my desk, back to work,”

and closed his eyes. Last line.
What a surprise to learn
the greatest pleasure of life was
all that daily labor.

Funeral Blues
by W.H. Auden

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song:
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

The Day Lady Died
by Frank O’Hara. Written for Billy Holiday.
It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don’t know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
doesn’t even look up my balance for once in her life
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan’s new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
of Genet, but I don’t, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

We Named You Mercy
Amanda Johnston
I count the years after you,
know your would-be ages and remember
the sadness that consumed me with the
bitter sound of you, my almost-children.
Could not conceive in conceiving you
our muted heat and all that got
through heaven’s gate to become that
half-wing that was your soul. Was you.
I saw your face once and, yes, I did
kiss your cheeks and cry for your sweet not-
quite nose, not-quite lips. Would I get
another chance to see you if I held the knife? Cold, the
sterile taker’s tools, my hands, bloody and damp.
In the darkness, I felt your toes bloom small
petals against my ribs. Your closed eyes, pulps
of possibility. Did you see me? The one with
empty arms stretching to embrace a
a silhouette of you? A ghost with little
more than hope for history. Or
did I make that up to keep you with
me a little longer? Did you stay until the no
I set upon your body untangled itself from sprigs of hair
and released you from the softness that tethered you to the
love in our cold mercy? Quieted blues, your singers
whose band tucked away their baritone horns and
my chosen grief. How those little workers
of sadness gathered me up, my heart, that
splintered with your hard stop. I will never
know the joy to have handled
your urgent cries against my chest or thirst for the
almost milk that did not swell, but was light as air.
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