

MARGARET ATWOOD ■ (b. 1939)

Margaret Atwood is the leading woman writer of Canada, and she excels at both poetry and prose fiction. Among her many novels, *The Handmaid's Tale* is perhaps the best known, becoming a bestseller in the United States and the subject of a motion picture. Atwood's *Selected Poems* appeared in 1976.

Siren^o Song

This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who has heard it
is dead, and the others can't remember.

Siren in Greek myth, one of the women whose irresistible song lured sailors onto the rocks

Shall I tell you the secret
and if I do, will you get me
out of this bird suit?

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I don't enjoy it here
squatting on this island
looking picturesque and mythical

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with these two feathery maniacs,
I don't enjoy singing
this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,
to you, only to you.
Come closer. This song

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is a cry for help: Help me!

Only you, only you can,
you are unique

at last. Alas

it is a boring song

but it works every time.

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The Tyger

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

The author
William Blake

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YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA ■ (b. 1947)

Yusef Komunyakaa is a native of Bogalusa, Louisiana. Komunyakaa has written memorably on a wide range of subjects, including jazz and his service during the Vietnam War. Neon Vernacular: New and Selected Poems (1993) won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994, and Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems appeared in 2001.

Facing It

My black face fades,
hiding inside the black granite.
I said I wouldn't,
dammit: No tears.
I'm stone. I'm flesh.

My clouded reflection eyes me
like a bird of prey, the profile of night
slanted against morning. I turn
this way—the stone lets me go.
I turn this way—I'm inside
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
again, depending on the light
to make a difference.

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I go down the 58,022 names,
half-expecting to find

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my own in letters like smoke.

I touch the name Andrew Johnson;

I see the booby trap's white flash.

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse

but when she walks away

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the names stay on the wall.

Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
wings cutting across my stare.

The sky. A plane in the sky.

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A white vet's image floats
closer to me, then his pale eyes
look through mine. I'm a window.

He's lost his right arm

inside the stone. In the black mirror

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a woman's trying to erase names:

No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

—1988

The author B. H. Fairchild

Body and Soul

Half-numb, guzzling bourbon and Coke from coffee mugs,
our fathers fall in love with their own stories, nuzzling
the facts but mauling the truth, and my friend's father begins
to lay out with the slow ease of a blues ballad a story
about sandlot baseball in Commerce, Oklahoma decades ago.
These were men's teams, grown men, some in their thirties
and forties who worked together in zinc mines or on oil rigs,
sweat and khaki and long beers after work, steel guitar music
whanging in their ears, little white rent houses to return to
where their wives complained about money and broken

Kenmores^o

and then said the hell with it and sang *Body and Soul*
in the bathtub and later that evening with the kids asleep
lay in bed stroking their husband's wrist tattoo and smoking
Chesterfields from a fresh pack until everything was O.K.
Well, you get the idea. Life goes on, the next day is Sunday,
another ball game, and the other team shows up one man short.

They say, we're one man short, but can we use this boy,
he's only fifteen years old, and at least he'll make a game.
They take a look at the kid, muscular and kind of knowing
the way he holds his glove, with the shoulders loose,
the thick neck, but then with that boy's face under
a clump of angelic blonde hair, and say, oh, hell, sure,
let's play ball. So it all begins, the men loosening up,
joking about the fat catcher's sex life, it's so bad
last night he had to hump his wife, that sort of thing,
pairing off into little games of catch that heat up into
throwing matches, the smack of the fungo bat, lazy jogging
into right field, big smiles and arcs of tobacco juice,
and the talk that gives a cool, easy feeling to the air,
talk among men normally silent, normally brittle and a little
angry with the empty promise of their lives. But they chatter
and say rock and fire, babe, easy out, and go right ahead
and pitch to the boy, but nothing fancy, just hard fastballs
right around the belt, and the kid takes the first two

¹⁰ Kenmores a brand of appliance

I think I know what the truth of this story is, and I imagine
 it lying there in the weeds behind that Allis Chalmers
 just waiting for the obvious question to be asked: why, oh
 why in hell didn't they just throw around the kid, walk him,
 after he hit the third homer? Anybody would have,
 especially nine men with disappointed wives and dirty socks
 and diminishing expectations for whom winning at anything
 meant everything. Men who know how to play the game,
 who had talent when the other team had nothing except

this ringer

who without a pitch to hit was meaningless, and they could
 go home

with their little two-dollar side bets and stride into the house
 singing *If You've Got the Money, Honey, I've Got the Time*
 with a bottle of Southern Comfort under their arms and grab
 Dixie or May Ella up and dance across the gray linoleum
 as if it were V-Day⁸⁴ all over again. But they did not.

And they did not because they were men, and this was a boy.
 And they did not because sometimes after making love,
 after smoking their Chesterfields in the cool silence and
 listening to the big bands on the radio that sounded so

glamorous,

so distant, they glanced over at their wives and noticed the lines
 growing heavier around the eyes and mouth, felt what
 their wives

felt: that Les Brown and Glenn Miller and all those dancing
 couples

and in fact all possibility of human gaiety and light-heartedness
 were as far away and unreachable as Times Square or the
 Avalon

ballroom. They did not because of the gray linoleum lying
 there

in the half-dark, the free calendar from the local mortuary
 that said one day was pretty much like another, the work
 gloves

looped over the doorknob like dead squirrels. And they did not

⁸⁴ V-Day V-E Day (May 8, 1945) marked the end of World War II in Europe; V-J Day (August 15, 1945) marked the end of the war in the Pacific

because they had gone through a depression and a war that
had left

them with the idea that being a man in the eyes of their fathers
and everyone else had cost them just too goddamned much to
lay it

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at the feet of a fifteen year-old boy. And so they did not walk
him,

and lost, but at least had some ragged remnant of themselves
to take back home. But there is one thing more, though it is not
a fact. When I see my friend's father staring hard into the
bottomless

well of home plate as Mantle's fifth homer heads toward
Arkansas,

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I know that this man with the half-orphaned children and
worthless Dodge has also encountered for his first and possibly
only time that vast gap between talent and genius, has seen
as few have in the harsh light of an Oklahoma Sunday,

the blonde
and blue-eyed bringer of truth, who will not easily be forgiven.

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MARK STRAND ■ (b. 1934)

Mark Strand displays a simplicity in his best poems that reveals the influence of Spanish-language poets like Nicanor Parra, the father of "anti-poetry," and Rafael Alberti, whom Strand has translated. Strand was named U.S. poet laureate in 1990.

The Tunnel

A man has been standing
in front of my house
for days. I peek at him
from the living room

window and at night,
unable to sleep,
I shine my flashlight
down on the lawn.
He is always there.

After a while
I open the front door
just a crack and order
him out of my yard.
He narrows his eyes
and moans. I slam
the door and dash back
to the kitchen, then up
to the bedroom, then down.

I weep like a schoolgirl
and make obscene gestures
through the window. I
write large suicide notes
and place them so he
can read them easily.
I destroy the living
room furniture to prove
I own nothing of value.

When he seems unmoved
I decide to dig a tunnel
to a neighboring yard.
I seal the basement off
from the upstairs with
a brick wall. I dig hard
and in no time the tunnel
is done. Leaving my pick
and shovel below,

I come out in front of a house
and stand there too tired to
move or even speak, hoping
someone will help me.
I feel I'm being watched

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The author W.S. Merwin⁻¹⁹⁶⁹
The Last One

Well they'd made up their minds to be everywhere because
why not.

Everywhere was theirs because they thought so.
They with two leaves they whom the birds despise.
In the middle of stones they made up their minds.
They started to cut.

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Well they cut everything because why not.
Everything was theirs because they thought so.
It fell into its shadows and they took both away.
Some to have some for burning.

Well cutting everything they came to the water.
They came to the end of the day there was one left standing.
They would cut it tomorrow they went away.
The night gathered in the last branches.
The shadow of the night gathered in the shadow on the water.
The night and the shadow put on the same head.
And it said Now.

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Well in the morning they cut the last one.
Like the others the last one fell into its shadow.
It fell into its shadow on the water.
They took it away its shadow stayed on the water.

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Well they shrugged they started trying to get the shadow
away.

They cut right to the ground the shadow stayed whole.
They laid boards on it the shadow came out on top.
They shone lights on it the shadow got blacker and clearer.

They exploded the water the shadow rocked.
They built a huge fire on the roots.
They sent up black smoke between the shadow and the sun.
The new shadow flowed without changing the old one.
They shrugged they went away to get stones.

They came back the shadow was growing.
They started setting up stones it was growing.
They looked the other way it went on growing.
They decided they would make a stone out of it.
They took stones to the water they poured them into the shadow.
They poured them in they poured them in the stones vanished.
The shadow was not filled it went on growing.
That was one day.

The next day was just the same it went on growing.
They did all the same things it was just the same.
They decided to take its water from under it.
They took away water they took it away the water went down.
The shadow stayed where it was before.
It went on growing it grew onto the land.
They started to scrape the shadow with machines.
When it touched the machines it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with sticks.
Where it touched the sticks it stayed on them.
They started to beat the shadow with hands.
Where it touched the hands it stayed on them.
That was another day.

Well the next day started about the same it went on growing.
They pushed lights into the shadow.

Where the shadow got onto them they went out.

They began to stomp on the edge it got their feet.
And when it got their feet they fell down.

It got into eyes the eyes went blind.

The ones that fell down it grew over and they vanished.

The ones that went blind and walked into it vanished.

The ones that could see and stood still

It swallowed their shadows.

Then it swallowed them too and they vanished.

Well the others ran.

PHILIP LEVINE ■ (b. 1928)

Philip Levine was born in Detroit, Michigan. He is one of many contemporary poets to hold a degree from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. The gritty urban landscapes and characters trapped in dead-end industrial jobs that provide Levine subjects for many poems match exactly with his unadorned, informal idiom. As teacher and mentor, Levine has influenced many younger poets.

You Can Have It

My brother comes home from work
and climbs the stairs to our room.
I can hear the bed groan and his shoes drop
one by one. You can have it, he says.

The moonlight streams in the window
and his unshaven face is whitened
like the face of the moon. He will sleep
long after noon and waken to find me gone.

Thirty years will pass before I remember
that moment when suddenly I knew each man
has one brother who dies when he sleeps
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors, hands
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it?

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All night at the ice plant he had fed
the chute its silvery blocks, and then I
stacked cases of orange soda for the children
of Kentucky, one gray box-car at a time

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with always two more waiting. We were twenty
for such a short time and always in
the wrong clothes, crusted with dirt
and sweat. I think now we were never twenty.

In 1948 in the city of Detroit, founded
by de la Mothe Cadillac for the distant purposes
of Henry Ford, no one wakened or died,
no one walked the streets or stoked a furnace,

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for there was no such year, and now
that year has fallen off all the old newspapers,
calendars, doctors' appointments, bonds,
wedding certificates, drivers licenses.

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The city slept. The snow turned to ice.
The ice to standing pools or rivers
racing in the gutters. Then bright grass rose
between the thousands of cracked squares,

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and that grass died. I give you back 1948.
I give you all the years from then
to the coming one. Give me back the moon
with its frail light falling across a face.

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Give me back my young brother, hard
and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse
for God and burning eyes that look upon
all creation and say, You can have it.

YOU CAN HAVE IT

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Alberto Ríos was born in Nogales, Arizona, the son of a Mexican-American father and an English-born mother. He won the Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets for his first book, *Whispering to Fool the Wind* (1982). He has also written a collection of short stories, *The Iguana Killer: Twelve Stories of the Heart*, which won the Western States Book Award.

The Purpose of Altar Boys

Tonio told me at catechism
the big part of the eye
admits good, and the little
black part is for seeing
evil—his mother told him
who was a widow and so
an authority on such things.
That's why at night
the black part gets bigger.
That's why kids can't go out
at night, and at night
girls take off their clothes
and walk around their
bedrooms or jump on their
beds or wear only sandals
and stand in their windows.

I was the altar boy

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who knew about these things,
whose mission on some Sundays
was to remind people of
the night before as they
knelt for Holy Communion.

To keep Christ from falling
I held the metal plate under chins,
while on the thick
red carpet of the altar
I dragged my feet
and waited for the precise
moment: plate to chin
I delivered without expression
the Holy Electric Shock,
the kind that produces
a really large swallowing
and makes people think.
I thought of it as justice.
But on other Sundays the fire
in my eyes was different,
my mission somehow changed.
I would hold the metal plate
a little too hard
against those certain same
nervous chins, and I
I would look
with authority down
the tops of white dresses.

e. e. cummings was the son of a Harvard professor and Unitarian clergyman. Edward Estlin Cummings served as a volunteer ambulance driver in France during World War I. cummings's experimentation with the typographical aspects of poetry reveals his serious interest in cubist painting, which he studied in Paris in the 1920s. A brilliant satirist, he also excelled as a writer of lyrical poems whose unusual appearance and idiosyncratic grammar, spelling, and punctuation often overshadow their traditional themes.

pity this busy monster, manunkind

pity this busy monster, manunkind,
not. Progress is a comfortable disease:
your victim (death and life safely beyond)
plays with the bigness of his littleness
—electrons° deify one razorblade
into a mountainrange; lenses extend
unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish
returns on its unself.

A world of made
is not a world of born—pity poor flesh
and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this
fine specimen of hypermagical

ultraomnipotence. We doctors know
a hopeless case if—listen: there's a hell
of a good universe next door; let's go