



**TOSSING AND  
TURNING**

POEMS

**JOHN UPDIKE**

A K N O P F  B O O K

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*John Updike*

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TOSSING  
and  
TURNING  
POEMS



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hen first he saw. Alas!  
ll tup. Full throb.  
arbling. Ah, lure! Alluring.  
artha! Come!  
apclop. Clipclap. Clappyclap.

—*Ulyss*

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# YOU WHO SWIM

ou who in water move as one  
ng rounded to this use, a stone  
at gently fails to sink, you tint  
wind tints air this element.

ndrogynous, your round face shorn  
r bathing-cap, you feign to drown.  
he dead man's float" you say and smile,  
ur lashes wet and animal.

ft teacher, otter, other, moth  
the sunk sun, you play at death;  
e surface glitter slips, and air  
ces your throat with shards of glare.

night you rise beside me, face  
et with the dark, your dim lips spaced  
hold the bubble love; your eyes  
e shut. We swim our dead men's lives.

---

# DREAM AND REALITY

um in a room.  
everything is white, the walls  
e white, there are no windows.  
ere is a door.  
open it, and neatly  
a shadow a coating of snow  
lls door-shaped into the room.  
hink, *Snow*, not surprised  
is inside and outside both,  
with an igloo.  
nove through the open door  
to the next room; this, too, is  
nite and windowless and perfect.  
hink, *There must be more than this*.  
his is a dream.

y daughter finds bones  
t the marshes. I examine them:  
er heads with sockets round as  
rtoon eyes, slender jaws broken.  
ere are tiny things too,  
bigger than a pulled tooth,  
d just that white—burs of bone,  
tricate, with pricking flanges  
ere miniature muscles attached.  
e says, *Those are mouse jaws*.  
eed: I see teeth like rows  
the letter “i” in diamond type.  
e tells me, *I find them*  
*the cough balls of owls*.  
d this is reality.

---

# THE SOLITARY POND

ie fall we moved to the farm, I was thirteen;  
e half-wild grapes on the dilapidated arbor  
uld not be eaten, and the forests and brown fields  
so seemed to have no purpose. I grew accustomed,

at winter before the first spring, to hike alone,  
icking first under our barbed wire, then our neighbor's,  
rough thorny and hurricane-hit woods to a store  
lling candy and soft drink and gas by Route 11.

eturning one afternoon along an old wall,  
ame to a shallow, solitary pond, frozen,  
t more than fifteen feet across, and lined with stalks  
d briar-strands that left the center scarcely open.

ecalling the rink in the town we had moved from,  
etched my dull skates from the attic chest and blundered  
ck through sharp thickets while the cold grew and a frown  
om the sky deepened the ominous area under

e black branches. My fingers were numb at the laces,  
d the ice was riddled with twigs, and my intent  
glide back to childhood absurd. I fell, unstable  
t the clutter of wood and water bubbled and bent  
e earth itself, and thrashed home through the trees hating  
e very scratches left by my experiment.

---

## LEAVING CHURCH EARLY

hat, I wonder, were we hurrying to,  
y grandfather, father, mother, myself,  
the last anthem was commencing? Were  
e avoiding the minister's hand at the door?  
y mother shied, in summer, from being touched.  
: was it my father, who thought life was grim  
d music superfluous, dodging the final hymn?  
: could, I wonder now, the impetus  
at moved the small procession of us up  
d out, apologizing, from the pew  
ve come from the ancient man, mysterious  
me as an ancestor turned to ash,  
no held some thunders though, a village bully  
his time and still a steadfast disliker  
other people's voices? Whatever the cause,  
e moved, *bump* and whisper, down  
e side aisle, while the organ mulled Stanza One,  
quadraped herd, branded as kin, I  
e last of the line, adolescent, a-blush,  
it through the odor of piety and the scents  
ome purchased at Kresge's, some given by God)  
y buxom country cousins harbored in  
eir cotton dresses, to the sighing exit  
rich opened on the upbeat as the choir  
love of the Lord and imperfect unison  
ing its best self over the balcony.

ie lifted voices drifted behind us, absurd.  
ose pebbles acknowledged our shoes.  
ir Buick, black and '36, was parked  
a hickory picnic grove where a quoit stake,  
visible as Satan in the grass  
Eden, might spear a tire "of the unwary,"  
my grandfather put it. The interior  
the auto hit us with an hour's heat.  
e got in gear, our good clothes mussed,  
d, exonerated for the week, bounced home.

ome: the fields, red, with acid rows of corn  
d sandstone corner-markers. The undertone

insect-hum, the birds too full to sing.

---

Sunday haze in Pennsylvania.

My unchurched grandma caught in the foursquare house,  
we prattled in the door, like a burglar  
trapped in mid-theft, half-paralyzed, her frame  
lingering in my memory between two tasks,  
about to do something, but what? A cream  
drooping in her hand, empty or it would spill—  
is it a potato-masher, or  
a wooden spoon? White-haired, stricken, she stares  
unable to welcome us back searches for a word.

What had we hurried back to? There could be  
no work, a mock-Genesiac rest reigned  
over the bewitched farmland. Our strawberries  
rotted in their rows unrummaged-for;  
no snorting, distant tractor underlined  
the rasp of my father's pencil as he marked,  
with his disappointed grimace, math exams.  
The dogs smelled boredom, and collapsed.  
The colors of the Sunday comics jangled,  
tinted off-key, and my grandfather's feet,  
trotting in for a soliloquy, kicked up fuzz.

My father stood to promenade his wounds.  
Laying down, feeling weak, and pulled a book  
across my eyes the way a Bedouin  
awaiting out a sandstorm drapes his sheet.  
The women clucked and quarrelled with the pots  
over the fire who was cook. A foody fog  
rose. The dogs rose with it, and the day  
looked as if it might survive to noon.

What is wrong with this picture? What is strange?  
Each figure tends its own direction, keeps  
its own axis of its own theatric chore,  
attered, anarchic, kept home by poverty,  
with nowhere else to go. A modern tribe  
could be aligned around "the television,"  
the family show-off, the sparkling prodigy  
that needs a constant watching lest it sulk and cease  
to lift into celebrity the arc  
of its interlocked anonymous: we were not such.  
We have spurned all entertainment but our misery.

esus,” my father cried, “I hate the world!”  
Mother,” my mother called, “you’re in the way!”  
e grateful for your blessings,” Grandpa advised,  
ifting his feet and showing a hairless shin.  
ch,” Grandma brought out in self-defense,  
e syllable a gem of German indignation,  
guttural edge unchipped, while I,  
ll in the sabbath shirt and necktie, bent  
y hopes into the latest Nero Wolfe, imagining  
yself orchidaceous in Manhattan and  
entally constructing, not Whodunit,  
it How to Get Out of Here: my dastardly plot.

ie rug, my closest friend, ignored  
y elbows. Geraniums raged on the sills.  
ie furniture formed a living dismal history  
heritage, abandonment, and purchase,  
etension, compromise, and wear: the books  
ed to believe in a better world but failed.  
i incongruous painting told of dunes  
d a dab of unattainable sea.  
tside, a lone car passed, the mailbox held  
o hope of visitation; no peacock magazine,  
rapped in brown paper, rife with ads, would come  
unremind us of what we were, poor souls  
o had left church early to be about  
e business of soaking ourselves in Time,  
inking doughnuts let fall into the cup.  
ot Pennsylvania, hazy, hugged the walls  
sandstone two feet thick as other cells  
fold the carcinomic hyperactive one; we were  
seased, unneighborly, five times alone, and quick.

hat was our hurry? Sunday afternoon  
ckoned with radioed ballgames, soft ice cream,  
rtive trips into the county, naps  
r the elderly, daydreams for the young,  
mile blind growth steamed to the horizon of hills,  
e Lord ignoring His own injunction to rest.  
y book grew faint. My grandfather lifted his head,  
tentive to what he alone divined;  
s glasses caught the light, his nose  
claimed an ancient handsomeness.  
s wife, wordless, came and sat beside.

y father swished his hips within his bath of humor  
d called his latest recognition to the other  
-captain of dissatisfaction; my mother  
me to the living-room doorway, and told us off.  
e is the captive, we are the clumsy princes  
no jammed the casket with our bitter kisses.  
e is our prison, the rampart of her forehead  
fiery red. We shake our chains, amused.  
er myths and our enactment of them tickle better  
e underside of facts than Bible fables;  
re to this house, this mythy *then*, we hurried,  
dging the benediction to bestow,  
rselfes upon ourselves, the blessing.

### *Envoi*

y mother, only you remember with me,  
u alone still populate that room.  
u write me cheerful letters mentioning Cher  
d Barbara Walters as if they were there with you,  
aler than the dead. We left church early  
ay? To talk? To love? To eat? To be free  
cant not of our own patenting? You read,  
u write me, Aristotle and Tolstoi  
d claim to be amazed, how much they knew.  
end you this poem as my piece of the puzzle.  
e know the truth of it, the past, how strange,  
ow many corners wouldn't bear describing,  
e "rubbing elbows," how busy we were forgiving—  
e had no time, of course, we *have* no time  
do all the forgiving that we must do.



---

# THE HOUSE GROWING

*April 1972*

ie old house grows, adding rooms of silence.  
y grandfather coughing as if to uproot  
rdock from his lungs,  
y grandmother tapping a ragged path  
om duty to duty, and now  
y father, prancing and whinnying  
dramatize his battle for the dollar,  
icking himself with pens to start each day—  
silent. The house grows vast.  
; windows take bites of the sky  
feed its flight toward emptiness. The mantel  
states its curve of molding undismayed,  
e hearthstones fatten on the vanished.

---

# QUERY

ear tree, why blossom?  
hy push this hard glitter  
life from your corpse?

eadless and hollow,  
ch major limb broken  
old storm or snowfall,  
ou startle the spring.

oesn't it hurt?  
our petals say not,  
oth from your shell  
e laughter, like breath.

it (your branchlets spew up  
an agony's  
outings) it must.

---

# LATE JANUARY

ie elms' silhouettes  
ain relent,  
afless but furred

th the promise of leaves,  
ll red in a sky dull yellow  
th the threat of snow.

at blur, verging on growth:  
me's sharp edge is slitting  
other envelope.

---

## TOUCH OF SPRING

in wind winds off the water,  
rth lies locked in dead snow,  
it sun slants in under the yew hedge,  
d the ground there is bare,  
th some green blades there,  
d my cat knows,  
arpening her claws on the flesh-pink wood.

---

# MELTING

rily ice congeals on high  
om Earth's calm breath and slantwise falls  
d six-armed holds its crystal faith until  
n, remembering his lordly duty, burns.

ommences then this vast collection:  
tters, sewers, rivulets  
lieve the finned drift's weight  
d the pace-packed pavement unsheathe.

glistens, drips, purls—the World:  
ightness steaming, elixir sifting  
r gravity's simplicity from all that will silt.

ie round-mouthed drains, the square-mouthed grates  
ke, and they take; down tunnels runs  
e dead storm sobbing, Proserpine.

---

## BATH AFTER SAILING

om ten to five we whacked the waves,  
e hostile, mobile black  
at lurched beneath the leeward winch  
helplessly we heeled.

ow after six I lie at ease,  
ease in a saltless sea my size,  
y fingertips shrivelled as if dead,  
e sway of the sloop still haunting the tub.

an't stop seeing the heartless waves  
e mirthless color of green tar  
ding on themselves like ball-bearings,  
ep and opaque and not me,

ot me: I was afraid,  
raid of heeling over in the wind  
d inhaling bubbling lead  
d sinking, opaque as stone.

rd, how light my feet,  
ed to their salt-soaked sneakers,  
lt on the dock, amid the mysterious  
e adiness of trees and air.

lid not want, I had not wanted  
die. I saw death's face  
that mass absorbed  
shrugging off its timeless weight,

e same dull mass blond Vikings scanned,  
pervious to all the sailor love  
rust onto it. My shredded hand  
hed on the jib sheet line.

ie boat would clumsily, broken  
ings flapping, come about,  
d the slickered skipper search  
e sea-face and find me gone,

s surprise not total,  
d one wave much like the rest,  
toppling ton, a rib of time,  
urgent message from nothing to nothing.

hank you, God of trees and air,  
ose steeples testify  
something steady slipped by chance  
on Your tar-green sliding face,

r this my mock survival.  
y children's voices plumb my death.  
y rippling legs are hydra limbs.  
y penis, my representative,

y emissary to darkness, survivor  
many a plunge, flipflops  
leways, alive and small  
d pallid in reprieve.

ack sea, deep sea, you dangle  
neath my bliss like a dreadful gamble.  
ute, white as a swimming pool cork,  
loat on the skin

sleepiness, of my sleep,  
all sleep ... how much I prefer  
is microcosmic version  
flirting with immersion.

---

# ON AN ISLAND

anded, my wife turned on the radio for news of home.  
stead she heard that near us a plane had crashed into the sea.

le told me after dinner she couldn't face the flight home:  
What would I tell the children as we go down?"

oooh-pooohed her of course, told her the long odds;  
e made love with a desperate undercurrent, and fell asleep.

en I awoke in the dark, and her fears appeared real.  
e blinds were tilted black, my sunburn hurt, I was thirsty.

ie tranquil ocean was yet enormous in its noise;  
ad hissing pursued me into each of the rooms.

y children were asleep, each small mouth darkly open;  
he radio said that a couple with a ten-year-old child

as found in the water, their bodies still clutching him."  
oonlight, pale as a moth, chasmed the front room with shadow

id lay white on the water, white on the sliding,  
e huge-shushing sliding from island to island—

epless, inanimate, bottomless, prayer-denying,  
e sougning of matter cast off by the sun, blind sun

nong suns, massed liquid of atoms that conceives  
id consumes, that communes with itself only,

ulless and mighty; our planes, our islands sink:  
still moon plates the sealed spot where they were.



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