

Dickinson

She does not need another song—
song never was enough.

Her “business of circumference”
(she also said, “of love”)

was like a long, sustained embrace
outwards around a thing
she could not grasp, but *trying to*
enabled her to wring

a stintless harmony from hymn
according to her slant—
compacted like an acronym
and hard, like adamant.

Yeats

“Having forged words more potent than a curse,
teased song from prose, and prose from song in turn;
having raised strains as piercing and as terse
as stings inflicted in our daily strife
for which there’s no recourse; now come to learn
what brutal men know—that we must take from life,
that true contentment is not, at its root,
something born out of what we can accept
but what we can’t; and having grown adept
at harnessing my bitterness, averse
to wisdom that says song is substitute
or mere release—like yelling into rain—
I took whatever still made my heart soar
and cast it into verse, till it was plain
(if I wished) I could make it sing once more.”

Auden

In the recesses of our conscience he exists
like a reminder of some long neglected duty.
Like pavement cracks, verse should trip us up, he insists;
wherever there is truth, there also may be beauty.

His was a world where dark forces contended
blindly but with logic, inspiration was a myth,
power remote and yet real for the undefended,
and not about accepting so much as living with.

Critics charged him with tinkering. He only smiled.
Like art and most ideas, we can't grow up too soon.
In his insistence though, was something of the child
who pounds the earth so as not to ask for the moon.

Ethics never had a better spokesman. He was one
whom we would like to think of as immune to hype.
Poems were small, but, unlike life, could be redone.
Wisdom was the knowledge that you, too, were a type.

Larkin

Others speak as plainly. He makes us believe
he swallows truths that are distasteful to us.
Better knowing and bitter than naïve;
better yet, lucky and oblivious.
Denied unawareness, he walked a line
between outright complaint and reticence,
pressing his sour grapes into wine
in verses gesturing to common sense,
our worst natures, whatever bears the brunt
of disappointment in us . . .

verse insisting

on bleakness underneath things, though there might
be inadvertent beauty—rainbows twisting
in puddle oil, many-angled light
radiating from a glass of water's prism—
and love was real, a necessary myth;
selflessness, self-denial; and pessimism,
realism. Viewpoints hard to argue with.

And yet, though he railed against it, innocence
remained a belief dying to be reborn.
Nothing could ever change that, in a sense:
it was the thing about which he was most torn
and through which, killing it, he could be relieved
and sorry at its passing—anything but numb—
leaving us to wonder whether he had become
trapped in a posture of the less deceived.

Ashbery

*Four million of a newly discovered microbe
could fit into the period at the end of this sentence*
and I feel as though every one of them were
clinging to my words through turns of phrases
and leaving meanings behind.

He can do that to you
sometimes just by singing of love—how it lingers
like a conversation in a hallway, and how
you can almost follow its almost logic
even when you can't grasp it like a doorknob
nor know why you haven't wandered off course,
which of course we have, long ago. But I wonder,
how are we going to find an end to all of this?
Would someone please, just this once, take charge
and decide where we're going to eat? I'm sorry

if you aren't exactly following me. I can help it
and he means well, but meanwhile we are again
getting ahead of ourselves, which is mostly a good thing
and natural in the sense that it's hard not to wonder
how we will be treated when we reach the border
and go through customs—a task at once straightforward
and daunting, like an unread book, whose deviousness
ought not to be taken lightly. What will they make of him,
our little stow-away to the Temple of Fame,
when he no longer gets by on looks and a smile?
There will be hell to pay and we may not have a choice
no matter how steep the climb to the rotunda,
for they allot only so many light-years to constellations,
the stars are receding, and history is like a peloton
massing behind us and closing in. So back off.

Judgment Day may not be around the corner
but it can happen in any poem. The forces assembled
on our behalf or against us (for we would rather believe
them hostile than indifferent) have merely, like us,
suspended sentences. Yet make no mistake:
the military-industrial complex means business;
their operators put you on hold. If we are to engage
in the great American pastime of kvetching
and crown a winner, we had better crack the book.
It has been waiting for the right moment to open up
and may have to wait longer to be misunderstood
in ways that make sense. When that happens and you happen

to be free then, recall me. For even if all we do in our lives
is trade messages and constantly miss each other,
what we wish comes to pass far more than is realized.

A line must be drawn in the sand, however:
we won't be tricked into beauty, even granting that beauty
may be a trick, as philosophers have reminded us
much to their chagrin. That is where poetry, so to speak,
comes into play. What makes it work is his uncanny knack
for camouflaging his narcissism in a way
that makes you feel you're the center of inattention.
If it's working again, what can I say? It is a gift
that keeps misgiving in fits of exaltation. Which is to say
words can get the better of us when we let them.
Is that better? It's hard for me to tell. But don't tell me
I'm only thinking of myself when you are on my thoughts
more than I'd like if you knew. I've tried avoiding metaphor
but I can't shake the thought that you're not here.
I want to feel that closeness again. And want it more.

Stay with me a little longer. For though we can't be friends
since I'm still plotting to seduce you, I make an occasional point
and want to come back to you: it is scary when words no longer feel
that they were meant to be, especially in a poem. It is not just
his world record in vocabulary, nor even how he can make
words like "hijinks" almost cry. It has to do with distractions—
how life happens in them and beyond our expectations.
For even Ashbery nods, and once, when he blinked
(I swear this really happened), a new book of his appeared,
as though anticipating all of the objections
were the same as answering them. He may be accused
of trying too hard to be different, or of becoming "dated out"
after so many relations, but if so let us be thankful,
for once, that we live in this age of disinformation
where we can almost catch the references

and make the future wonder how we lived without them.