

MARY ANN

And the poem that I'm going to read was occasioned by the issuing of a stamp in the series on American poets.

PRYOR:

This one honors Emily Dickinson. The poem is called "Noblesse Oblige."

"Forgive me, Emily, for licking your left shoulder blade. How delicate, winglike, for running my semi-articulate tongue along the matched pearls of your spine. You had a backbone, Emily, to define and adhere to a new poetic even your few admirers called clumsy. Dolphin in breaker, swallow in ether, Emily. Never submissive to metrics, or rhyme, or logic.

Your dazzling fusion, your slantwise truth, bemusing the critics still. Call you Emily for sooth, yet isn't Lilliputian ever rude to Colossus? As I was remarking the other day to Will"-- this is Mary Ann Pryor for *National Public Radio*. [PAUSES] This is Mary Ann Pryor in Moorhead, Minnesota. [PAUSES] This is Mary Ann Pryor for *National Public Radio*. [PAUSES]

This is Mary Ann Pryor in Moorhead, Minnesota, and I'm going to read a poem about a discovery-- the kind of discovery one makes about oneself as one learns to live with one's self a little more comfortably-- and the title of the poem is "Dilettante."

"The day he discovered he was a dilettante, it gave him a rotten hour or two. While other people were busy exchanging memos-- achievers achieving, organizers organizing, admonishers admonishing, and the charlatans practicing chicanery-- he, lacking devotion even to contemplate a navel on a 40-hour week-- time and a half for overtime-- to produce, to make a meaningful contribution, to engage in a learning experience, to relate what you do to people you cannot like, never plugged in to an overall plan.

He would never publish an epigraph, or an episode, or an epigram, figure in a chain of authority diagram. By telegram, be summoned to Washington to serve on a Blue Ribbon Commission to investigate investigations for a dollar a year in expenses. You take the salary. Give me the perquisites. But strumming a bass to which he could never improvise a treble, painting a cloudy wash and a line of Lombardy poplars out of perspective, drafting a first sentence to a first chapter, watching a poem frazzle out into"-- and that's all there is to it. This is Mary Ann Pryor for *National Public Radio*. [CLEARS THROAT]

This is Mary Ann Pryor in Moorhead, Minnesota. I'm going to read a poem that's from a town in Massachusetts, a town where I once lived. It's a poem about climbing pine trees and living in a town in the '30s. It had been a woolen mill town where the mill owners did everything and then went away. We arrived there after the mills were gone. And this is what it was like to climb a tree, and to remember it, and to get pine pitch in my hair. "Pine Tree, The '30s."

"The branches spiral up and up, hand over hand. Green shaven sky, and far blue gaps, and roseate scale, and rosin-- amber blackening the paws. The scalp o' burrower enmeshes broken twigs. An arm runs beaded blood. The tapering and swaying shaft groans out, now clutch and blackout, by degrees to free the metronome of flesh attuned to vegetable rhythms ride the stem triumphant, open-eyed.

The valley palms, the matchbox mills. Church spires, pencil point, smoke queries. Shingles slope, prismatic in the tidal leaves. Below impacted earth, paint scaling, windows taped in uniform tenements, hollow storefronts, hush of wheels. The wool gone south-- weavers find interim jobs and wait. This underneath the leafy reassertion.

Kerosene takes the pitch off. Though you flay me, I'll cling my pine and rock me. Dissect the brain. Some needles of that pine, some splinters of that rotting town remain where lattice works of fragrant lumber rise. My treacherous eyes observe old clapboards weathering to the grain. Sad whim of mine houses a building-- take me by surprise." This is Mary Ann Pryor for *National Public Radio*. [PAUSES]

This is Mary Ann Pryor in Moorhead, Minnesota. Not so long ago, we were watching international chess-- the whole world with bated breath-- and during that time, I began thinking about the chess games I had watched bits of when I was a child. I won't say that all of the poem is literally true, but poetry isn't supposed to be-- some of it is. "The Chess Masters."

"The chess masters are doing their setting-up exercises, lashing their chests with ice water, performing their roadwork. The bishop dashes diagonally. The knight finds an opening in the line. The queen plays any position. Even a pawn leaps once. Only the sedentary king shuffles behind his hedge. The chess masters are drinking vegetable juice and munching wheat germ. They live on watermelon or red meat. They turn handsprings. Inhabit not the library, but the gymnasium.

Are they going to arm-wrestle? Biceps bulge for a little ivory salt shaker. The chess masters have no truck with sportsmanship. Sensitive as lyric tenors, their acquaintances handle grenades. Their rages name hurricanes. Their hobby is violence. When my uncles played chess, only my aunts screamed vixen while mashed potatoes scorched in the kitchen. My uncle smoked, hummed *O sole mio* and *Glow Worm*, distributed nickels for orange pineapple ice cream, and good riddance.

No one ever wept at a checkmate or hurled a board into the fireplace. Round-shouldered in flabby ageniality. I've got you this time. What rotten players they must have been." This is Mary Ann Pryor for *National Public Radio*. [PAUSES] That's it for this group.

[CLEARS THROAT] This is Mary Ann Pryor in Moorhead, Minnesota, and I'm going to be reading a few poems that, in one way or another, have grown up out of this Red River territory. I'll begin with a poem that has to do with winter and with Red River people. Maybe I should explain that I come from a different territory, so that the place has some of the charm of newness and strangeness. It's something that I've grown used to-- gotten to like. Now, "Red River People."

"Here on the ridge pole of the continent, where rivers amble north against their kind, transplanted Scandinavians resent the glossing tongue, approve the Loki mind. Shrewd, self-contained, they plow and reap-- resigned to eight-month winter, grimly concentrate the honey of the earth from muddy rind by raising beets. They live to legislate and make their winter sport political debate."

Perhaps I should mention that Loki is the Nordic god of mischief, and one of the first things that fascinated me here was the idea of a river running in the wrong direction. And one of the things that I'm proud to be part of is a state that raises so many excellent sugar beets and admirable politicians. The next poem is also a winter poem. It's the coldest poem I've ever written. It's called "Snowscape," and it feels the menace of the snow.

"The snow hounds bay at heel. The sun dogs haunt the sun. The walking man conceals his face behind a bush of breath. Whatever draws a breath, whatever warms a bone dares down the beveled shears of cold to snuff the tender smoke, to flaunt a walking smoke, to clump an awkward track, and watch the sun dogs twin the sun, and hear the snow creek under heel, and not look back-- and not look back."

The next poem is also wintry, but it's tangled up with another set of ideas. All of us have watched the moon walks and thought about them, and some people have been saying that the moon was spoiled. The glamor was gone. It's not green cheese anymore, and it's not love either. I'm not so sure that the moon can be worn out by a few people trekking across it. In this poem, I'm also thinking of a constellation-- the stars that make up the constellation Orion. And the dog star, Sirius, I think, is near it. And I was also thinking about those tombs of nights in museums where the night lies with his feet propped against a little dog or lion. The poem is called "The Chore."

The moon, lenticular, evolves a tinged corona-- man aboard the silver terrapin, unmarred. Orion, lazy huntsman, lolls an elbow on the east. What hound to couch those heels? The willow frets have crazed the snow. I carry out the garbage, dodging meteors."

Sometimes, walking on the snow, it's as if one were walking across the clear sky, anyway, very, very high above the Earth. Now I'm going to read a spring poem. All of us know about Sampson and what he was able to do with a jawbone of an ass. Well, this poem has a very much smaller jawbone-- the jawbone of a beaver-- and it's called "Jawboning." In fact, it's only half the jaw bone.

"With half the jawbone of a beaver, beadwork of molar, tusked incisor, plucked from the flotsam of the flood clay, mud-gray North Dakotan April, brought home for waiting papers for a touchstone or touch bone, such a bone by weathers honed to utter wildness. Wafer, scapular, scraper of lies, or vision-shaping tool with half the jawbone of a beaver, one conjures or, on occasion, one routes a fool."

Now, I'm moving a little bit ahead in the season with this poem. It came just before the leaves were out on the trees, but when students were already sitting all over the grass of the campus when they had a chance to. I came out of a building and almost stepped on two students and looked over and saw the full moon coming up, and then somebody moved a new tree into a new place, and this was the result on paper. "Prologue."

"Midway, the pillar lamps that guard the step sit the young lovers. Light intrudes between them. One's arm leans curving like an easy yoke about the other's throat. Knees front, they nuzzle ear and cheek bone, whispering and kissing. Full moon above the Center for the Arts burns orange in a cloud. A tree, replanted, makes moonscript where last night the grass was blank."

The next poem I'm going to read has a very specific occasion. The Imagination '71 and '72 festivals have provided entertainment for many people in the region. I was told a story about Imagination '71 about a group of schoolchildren who had watched a pottery-making exhibit. After the demonstration, the potter thought that the students should have some kind of souvenir. The only thing he had was a bit of wet clay. Now, picture small children, wet clay, a bus. This is the way I imagine it.

"After the demonstration for the children, the potter, in a burst of generosity or Loki exercise-inspired malice, let every child dip in and help himself-- one juicy handful clay-- and sent them home-- ingenuous teachers herded off by bus. What hungry pockets, collars agape. What ear holes, empty mouths. What cordiality of sweater meshes and hair cohesive. What missile launchings. What friendship sealed. What footprints. What embossed rings on walls and knobs, abrupt medallions, gargoyles. What a richness of forms-- an exquisite plasticity. Creation, chaos, fish, bird, reptile, beast. The bus and instantaneous arc-- it was a holy mess, and it was good."

The last poem I'm going to read is very short. Every spring, people in this area wait for the cedar waxwings to come to harvest the tree buds and the leftover berries. This poem is called "Harvest." "Russian olive trees, harbor cedar waxwings, April harvest-- listen." And thank you for listening. This has been Mary Ann Pryor in Moorhead, Minnesota, reading poetry about the region.