

# The Lyric Updike

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John Updike, *Selected Poems*. Ed. Christopher Carduff. New York: Knopf, 2015.

Since John Updike's untimely death at the beginning of 2009, a number of volumes of his work have appeared: first, his final book of poems, *Endpoint*, which he finished a month before he died; then a last book of stories, *My Father's Tears*, and a handsome edition of the Maples stories in the Everyman's Pocket Classics series. There followed two large collections of essays, *Higher Gossip*, made up of remaining prose pieces, and *Always Looking*, the rest of his art criticism. These last two books were edited by Christopher Carduff, who also edited the Library of America's collected stories in two volumes—everything but the Maples stories and those about Henry Bech. Most recently there has been a reprint of *Olinger Stories*, joining the Maples in the Everyman's Pocket Classics. Now appears a welcome edition of his poems, selected and edited by the resourceful Mr. Carduff and with a fine introduction by Brad Leithauser, a poet and novelist whose skills at noticing and registering rival Updike's formidable ones.

Updike collected his poems in 1993, separating them into two categories, with his light verse occupying the second section, given less important status. In his preface to the collection he wrote, "If a set of lines brought back to me something I actually saw or felt, it was not light verse" (*Collected Poems* xxiii). Carduff has excluded from this selection the light verse, a medium Updike practiced less and less after the 1950s; it had to make way to accommodate the two books of poems he produced after the collected volume: *Americana* (2000) and the final *Endpoint*. In an appendix, the editor provides useful notes to the individual poems, arranged

chronologically by their completion date, and accompanied by comments Updike made about them, which Carduff has added to when appropriate. The result is a selection ranging from “Why the Telephone Wires Dip and the Poles Are Cracked and Crooked,” published in 1953 when Updike was still at Harvard, to “Fine Point,” completed a month before he died. The book should be seen as a major achievement in American poetry from the twentieth century’s second half.

Brad Leithauser’s introduction comes from a poet whose masterly book-length poem, *Darlington’s Fall*, embodies many of Updike’s own virtues as a poet (Updike gave it a blurb on the jacket). Leithauser puts the emphasis where it should be put in any consideration of these poems, stating, “They typically come to us unmediated through any fictional presence”—that it’s Updike himself who fosters “a companionable familiarity” in addressing us. Whereas in his novels we’re uncertain how much a particular incident was drawn directly from the novelist’s life, the poems “served as a diaristic outlet . . . an album of himself more accurate and intimate and multifaceted than any similar-sized collection of his prose.” In this sense they are “naked” (xvii). Leithauser notes how wide is the range of Updike’s vocabulary, drawing (as does Leithauser in his own poems) on the sciences—biology, astronomy, mathematics—to the extent that an untutored reader like this one sometimes gets lost. Leithauser puts it succinctly in respect to Updike’s adventurous subjects and language: “He put the dictionary through its paces” (xxiv).

Yet the poem of Updike’s that first suggested to me how fine a poet he could be has nothing at all exclusive or adventurous about its diction. “Dog’s Death,” published in 1965, tells a sad story in five stanzas:

#### DOG’S DEATH

She must have been kicked unseen or brushed by a car.  
Too young to know much, she was beginning to learn  
To use the newspapers spread on the kitchen floor  
And to win, wetting there, the words, “Good dog! Good dog!”

We thought her shy malaise was a shot reaction.  
The autopsy disclosed a rupture in her liver.  
As we teased her with play, blood was filling her skin  
And her heart was learning to lie down forever.

Monday morning, as the children were noisily fed  
And sent to school, she crawled beneath the youngest’s bed.  
We found her twisted and limp but still alive.  
In the car to the vet’s, on my lap, she tried

To bite my hand and died. I stroked her warm fur  
And my wife called in a voice imperious with tears.  
Though surrounded by love that would have upheld her,  
Nevertheless she sank and, stiffening, disappeared.

Back home, we found that in the night her frame,  
Drawing near to dissolution, had endured the shame  
Of diarrhoea and had dragged across the floor  
To a newspaper carelessly left there. *Good dog.*

(31)

For someone whose stylistic reputation is for elaborate and high-powered figuration, this is the plain style rather. There are some rhymes or half-rhymes, but they occur almost casually, as if they weren't the poet's interest. What we get instead is a direct presentation of an event, narrated by someone who speaks for himself and his family (in one of Updike's first poems to use "we") and is careful not to upstage the happening. What's moving and special about "Dog's Death" is the way it takes us from a tonal utterance, the family encouraging the animal's training by rewarding her with the approving "Good dog!" to something beyond tone, as in the final two words of the poem. "*Good dog*" comes, as it were, purely from voice, larger and less specifiable than an individual utterance would be. Among other things, it is a triumph of taste, given the possibilities for heavy emoting over the beloved dog. The poem is poignant, decorous, and full of strong feeling.

Leithauser points out how well and how often Updike wrote about death, culminating in the sequence of unrhymed sonnets he wrote in his last two months. When his father died in April 1972, he wrote "The House Growing," with the date as epigraph:

The old house grows, adding rooms of silence.  
My grandfather coughing as if to uproot  
burdock from his lungs,  
my grandmother tapping a ragged path  
from duty to duty, and now  
my father, prancing and whinnying  
to dramatize his battle for the dollar,  
pricking himself with pens to start each day—  
all silent. The house grows vast.  
Its windows take bites of the sky  
to feed its flight toward emptiness. The mantel

restates its curve of molding undismayed;  
the hearthstones fatten on the vanished.

(84)

It looks like an unrhymed sonnet but in fact has thirteen lines, as if to prove how little regard the poet had for formal perfection. Instead we get a prose memory, with sentences chopped up into lines, yet to my ears feeling natural and inevitable. To have the departure of one member of the house make it larger rather than diminish it is the conceit at play here. The diaristic impulse is evident: The poet's father died, he wrote down a couple of sensations or images, then molded them so as to fit the speaking voice in process of discovering something. When I published a book about Updike with some pages about the poetry, I noted how loose some of his "loose iambs" (Robert Frost's phrase) were. Detecting a hint of disapproval in my tone, Updike, in his polite letter acknowledging the book, advised me not to worry too much about loose iambs, saying that there were plenty of them in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He had a point.

After his mother dies (October 1989), the last member to leave the growing house, he views, in "Fall," the kitchen corner where she fell, cut herself, then died:

She was eighty-five.  
Her heart had floated to a stop and she dropped  
without lifting a hand or averting her face.  
  
What corner or edge might have given the gash?  
I saw none, then saw her glasses, a circle and half  
of plastic frames, the one lens popped  
and skipped a foot away amid the dust.  
I picked it all up, and the little wool hat  
(it was getting to be fall) she wore for warmth,  
with a spot of dried blood on the blue threads.  
She seemed so very small in these her remnants.

(148)

Did the popped glasses and little wool hat remain in the corner for the son to view after he had flown in from Boston? We can only say that these authenticating details needed to be there. The younger Updike's stated determination to celebrate "middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities" here receives one more rueful instance (*Assorted Prose* 186). "Details are the giant's fingers," he wrote in

one of his early stories,<sup>1</sup> and perhaps the twentieth-century American poet he most brings to mind is the master of detail, Elizabeth Bishop.

In speaking of the diaristic character of Updike's poems, Leithauser mentions a number of American poets of the last century from whose works one couldn't construct even a sketchy biography. Bishop is one of those he names, and it's perhaps the autobiographical absence, the creation of a registering mind not necessarily the poet's, that distinguishes her mastery of detail from Updike's. Even in a "minor" poem like her "Sandpiper," there is a quite distinctive, individual use of detail—presuming that we know what is or isn't "detail." Here are the first three stanzas:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,  
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.

He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,  
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet  
of interrupting water comes and goes  
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.  
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,  
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains  
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,  
he stares at the dragging grains.

(Bishop 131)

This exquisite run of stanzas, filled with small detail, shows a strong, overriding rhythm pulsing through them, that rhythm made more satisfyingly varied because of the strong rhymes. (Elsewhere Bishop has equal mastery of slant, unobtrusive rhymes.) It is all beautifully observed, but with an anonymous one doing the observing, unlike the personal thrust of an Updike poem. That freedom from the "personal" gives Bishop's poems a dimension—expansive, mythic, the opposite of closed-down—very different in its effect from Updike's. Of course no one would think of comparing the two, as if Bishop were so obviously a great modern poet that she brooks no such comparison with a poet who is usually taken to be slight, minor. But he's surely comparable with Bishop insofar as "no detail too small" eludes his reach.

Out of countless examples, here are two stanzas from "To a Box Turtle":

You were making your way through grave distances,  
your forefeet just barely extended and as dainty as dried  
coelacanth fins, as miniature sea-fans, your black nails  
decadent like a Chinese empress's, and your head  
a triangular snake-head, eyes ringed with dull gold.

I pick you up. Your imperious head withdraws.  
Your bottom plate, hinged once, presents a *No*  
with its courteous waxed surface, a marquetry  
of inlaid squares, fine-grained and tinted  
tobacco-brown and the yellow of a pipe smoker's teeth.

(147)

If anything this is too much, may be working too hard; yet these observed figures are nevertheless for real. Nobody has ever observed a box turtle this closely, I am convinced.

Nor, I am certain, as in "The Beautiful Bowl Movement," observed and admired "a masterpiece: a flawless coil, / unbroken, in the bowl, as if a potter / who worked in this most frail, least grateful clay / had set himself to shape a topaz vase" (146). No detail too small, and Elizabeth Bishop would never have done it—thankfully, some might say, though not your reviewer, pleased by the poem.

In the first part of his three-part poem "The Tower," W. B. Yeats angrily confronts the figure he has become in old age: "What shall I do with this absurdity— / O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature, / Decrepit age that has been tied to me / As to a dog's tail?" (Yeats 103). Yeats was sixty when he wrote these lines; Updike began to play the age card at about the same time when, like Yeats, he moved into his sixties. In his fiction, he looks back upon his erotic life as a younger man with nostalgia, ruefulness, or comic perspective—as with the hero in *Memories of the Ford Administration*, Alf Clayton, and his entanglements in adulterous liaisons that have disrupted his marriage. In the poems, Updike doesn't aspire to such flair, probably because of the diaristic way he takes toward the lyric "I" and his remembered waywardness. "To a Dead Flame" will do as an example of a poem that begins with cranky self-preoccupation about the current state of his "curious" eyebrows—"jagged gray wands" that "poke / up toward the sun and down into my eyes"—or the "aging smell" that "wafts upward / when I shed my underwear," or his diminished "potency, / which you would smilingly complain about," that "has become as furtive as an early mammal" (157).

Still, he reminds himself that she, the flame, is dead; he is alive and "The world

is still wonderful.” He proceeds to recall their time together in a more dignified, though no less critical way than he contemplated his eyebrows:

I thought of us, abed atop that hill,  
and of how I would race down through your woods  
to my car, and back to my life, my heart  
enormous with what I newly knew—  
the color of you naked, the milk of your sighs—  
through leaves washed to the glisten of fresh wounds.

(157)

In the last of four stanzas, composed without rhyme and, it seems, deliberately unformal, consisting of eleven lines (why?), he sums up what their illicit sex was about:

What desperate youthful fools we were, afraid  
of not getting our share, our prize in the race,  
like jostling marathoners starting out,  
clumsy but pulsingly full of blood.  
You dropped out, but we all drop out, it seems.  
You never met my jealous present wife;  
she hates this poem. The living have it hard,  
not living only in the mind, but in  
the receding flesh. Old men must be allowed  
their private murmuring, a prayer wheel  
set spinning to confuse and stay the sun.

(158)

The variety of manners and tones within these lines reminds us why Updike is so different from most poets, and in what way that difference is appealing. The stanza opens full-heartedly, with a fine, not condescending tribute to the race of marathoners, one of whom, his lover, has dropped out, probably too soon. After consoling her and himself that “we all drop out,” he indecorously invokes his present wife, not just present but jealous, as he confides to the dead flame in a manner rather over the top, “she hates this poem.” It is embarrassing, this interpolation, yet demonstrates how Updike is willing to exhibit his ego, his own ungenerous side, by way of giving a fuller human picture. The final lines of complaint, the old man’s complaint, is made in the interest of justifying, at least excusing, the “private murmuring” we have overheard. “To a Dead Flame” seems to me a bold effort at displaying not the best self the aging man might put forth, but one that refuses to conceal its own mix of poignant memory with the sometime pettiness of present murmurings.

The high point in this selection is the centerpiece of Updike's final volume, *Endpoint*. I wrote about it for this journal in 2011 and won't repeat myself here, except to say that the twenty-four-page sequence "Endpoint," consisting of unrhymed sonnets in pentameter (with a single exception) is unmatched by anything in American poetry. In his recent and excellent *Poetry Notebook*, Clive James reprints his *New York Times* review of *Endpoint*, in which he took the occasion to pay tribute to Updike's poetry in its last phase. "Updike was always so careful," James says, "not to make high claims for himself as a poet," with the result that too many critics took him at his word and dismissed or patronized the result (James 169). They should have looked harder, James writes, and the rest of his review is an attempt to make his own claim for Updike the poet. It's undeniable—with James ill and writing poems in anticipation of his own death—that Updike's final sequence should have spoken to him, although he rightly praises other poems from *Endpoint* not part of the sequence. But I think that he ends up underestimating, not making a high enough claim for Updike's poetry overall.

What James calls the "poetic reporting of America," which he says began before Whitman, was a great enterprise that Updike the novelist surely engaged in, but as poet not as much as James thinks he might have (James 172). He chooses Updike's tribute to the golfer Payne Stewart ("Elegy for a Real Golfer"), who died in an "unreal way," choking to death in a private jet (*Endpoint* 39). James calls it a fine example of how Updike "reported the nation" but, alas, didn't do enough of such reporting in his poetry. In his closing paragraph he finds that too often Updike's "fatal propensity for revelling in skill" substituted for something deeper (James 173). And yet to these eyes and ears, reporting America in verse is exactly what Updike consistently did, and not just or mainly by writing, as in the final volume of poems, about Frankie Laine, or Doris Day, or Payne Stewart, but by giving us an "America" painstakingly, often lovingly observed for fifty years of the late twentieth century. It's interesting that James closes his review by alluding to "Bird Caught in My Deer Netting" (also from the last book), a poem that for James proves that Updike "not only had the whole tradition of English-speaking poetry in his head, he had the means to add to it" (James 172). It is indeed a wonderful poem, and painful to traverse, especially in lines from the third strophe: "How many starved hours of struggle resumed / in fits of life's irritation did it take / to seal and sew shut the berry-bright eyes / and untie the tiny wild knot of a heart?" (*Selected Poems* 210).

But doesn't what is done so poignantly in "Bird Caught . . ." constitute poetic reporting of America? Isn't something a little different, maybe even a little more than "America" being reported here? Perhaps the answer is that Updike's lyrics,

as he said in an interview, are informed with “a perception—a breakthrough into nature, which encircles our numbness day and night.” Even when, he went on to say, “rhyme and meter . . . are brushed aside,” there is “a formal element without which nothing happens, nothing is *made*” (Plath 112). Such a breakthrough into nature is an escape from numbness. The few poems considered here don’t mention America, but as James’s admiration for “Bird Caught . . .” may suggest, if “America” is where you find it, through an American pair of eyes and ears, then it is American life reported on over the course of Updike’s poetry.

I hadn’t noticed until Christopher Carduff noted it that the single exception to the chronological sequence of unrhymed sonnets in “Endpoint” is a poem titled “Creeper,” fourteen lines but not feeling like a sonnet, which Updike had completed in August 2008 before he became ill. He placed it as the penultimate poem in “Endpoint,” perhaps knowing how beautifully it speaks for itself but not just for itself:

With what stoic delicacy does  
Virginia creeper let go:  
the feeblest tug brings down  
a sheaf of leaves kite-high,  
as if to say, *To live is good*  
*but not to live—to be pulled down*  
*with scarce a ripping sound,*  
*still flourishing, still*  
*stretching toward the sun—*  
*is good also, all photosynthesis*  
*abandoned, quite quits.* Next spring  
the hairy rootlets left unpulled  
snake out a leafy afterlife  
up that same smooth-barked oak.

(245)

#### NOTE

1. “The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother’s Thimble, and Fanning Island” (*Collected Early Stories* 354).

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