

Dana Gioia

Four Poems

Veterans' Cemetery

The ceremonies of the day have ceased,
Abandoned to the ragged crow's parade.
The flags unravel in the caterpillar's feast.
The wreaths collapse onto the stones they shade.

How quietly doves gather by the gate
Like souls who have no heaven and no hell.
The patient grass reclaims its lost estate
Where one stone angel stands as sentinel.

The voices whispering in the burning leaves,
Faint and inhuman, what can they desire
When every season feeds upon the past,
And summer's green ignites the autumn's fire?

The afternoon's a single thread of light
Sewn through the tatters of a leafless willow,
As one by one the branches fade from sight,
And time curls up like paper turning yellow.

—from *The Gods of Winter*, Graywolf Press, 1991

Night Watch

For my uncle, Theodore Ortiz, U.S.M.M.

I think of you standing on the sloping deck
as the freighter pulls away from the coast of China,
the last lights of Asia disappearing in the fog,
and the engine's drone dissolving in the old
monotony of waves slapping up against the hull.

Leaning on the rails, looking eastward to America
across the empty weeks of ocean,
how carefully you must have planned your life,
so much of it already wasted on the sea,
the vast country of your homelessness.

Macao, Vladivostok, Singapore.
Dante read by shiplamp on the bridge.
The names of fellow sailors lost in war.
These memories will die with you,
but tonight they rise up burning in your mind

interweaving like gulls crying in the wake,
like currents on a chart, like gulfweed
swirling in a star-soaked sea, and interchangeable
as all the words for night—*la notte, noche, Nacht, nuit*,
each sound half-foreign, half-familiar, like America.

For now you know that mainland best from dreams.
Your dead mother turning toward you slowly,
always on the edge of words, yet always
silent as the suffering Madonna of a shrine.
Or your father pounding his fist against the wall.

There are so many ways to waste a life.
Why choose between these icons of unhappiness,
when there is the undisguised illusion of the sea,
the comfort of old books and solitude to fill
the long night watch, the endless argument of waves?

Breathe in the dark and tangible air, for in a few weeks
you will be dead, burned beyond recognition,
left as a headstone in the unfamiliar earth
with no one to ask, neither wife nor children,
why your thin ashes have been buried here

and not scattered on the shifting gray Pacific.

—from *The Gods of Winter*, Graywolf Press, 1991

News from Nineteen Eighty-Four

for James Fenton

The great offensive in the East began this morning as our forces overran the enemy's positions. Total victory is now expected within weeks! The Spring Youth Festival will be delayed by an impromptu demonstration of support. Arrests continue at the Ministry. The weekly coffee ration will remain at sixty grams. More news in half an hour.

Arrests continue at the Ministry where ten high-ranking members have confessed to crimes against the People. Late last night news of another massive victory along the Eastern front. "The end's in sight," our Leader commented as he released the record figures of the summer harvest. Impromptu demonstrations of support occurred throughout the capital. More news at ten.

Fighting is still intense along the front as the cold weather stalls the enemy's feeble offensive. Now that the bombardment of the capital has ceased, the execution of draft evaders will resume tonight in Freedom Square. All rations have been raised with coffee now at thirty grams. Production goals have been surpassed in tin and bauxite. Morale among the volunteers is high.

The fires at the docks have been contained with suspects netted in a late-night sweep. The enemy's offensive in the East has been repulsed at great cost. But morale

among the senior volunteers is high.
The Worker's Festival began last night
with execution of trade dissidents.
Spring coffee rations climb to twenty grams.
Arrests continue at the Ministry.

—from *The Gods of Winter*, Graywolf Press, 1991

Elegy with Surrealist Proverbs as Refrain

"Poetry must lead somewhere," declared Breton.
He carried a rose inside his coat each day
to give a beautiful stranger—"Better to die of love
than love without regret." And those who loved him
soon learned regret. "The simplest surreal act
is running through the street with a revolver
firing at random." Old and famous, he seemed *démodé*.
There is always a skeleton on the buffet.

Wounded Apollinaire wore a small steel plate
inserted in his skull. "I so loved art," he smiled,
"I joined the artillery." His friends were asked to wait
while his widow laid a crucifix across his chest.
Picasso hated death. The funeral left him so distressed
he painted a self-portrait. "It's always other people,"
remarked Duchamp, "who do the dying."
I came. I sat down. I went away.

Dali dreamed of Hitler as a white-skinned girl—
impossibly pale, luminous and lifeless as the moon.
Wealthy Roussel taught his poodle to smoke a pipe.
"When I write, I am surrounded by radiance.
My glory is like a great bomb waiting to explode."
When his valet refused to slash his wrists,
the bankrupt writer took an overdose of pills.
There is always a skeleton on the buffet.

Breton considered suicide the truest art,
though life seemed hardly worth the trouble to discard.

The German colonels strolled the *Ile de la Cité*—
some to the Louvre, some to the *Place Pigalle*.
“The loneliness of poets has been erased,” cried Eluard,
in praise of Stalin. “Burn all the books,” said dying Hugo Ball.
There is always a skeleton on the buffet.
I came. I sat down. I went away.

—from *Interrogations at Noon*, Graywolf Press, 2001

Dana Gioia is the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. He is a successful businessman, educator, critic, anthologist, translator, and poet. His 1991 book, *Can Poetry Matter?* strongly influenced the art, and his three books of poetry (published by Graywolf Press) continue to delight and guide readers with their craft and passion.