

Classic Poetry Series

Alan Dugan
- poems -

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Alan Dugan(12 February 1923 - 3 September 2003)

Alan Dugan was an American poet. His poetry is known for its plain and direct language, though it is supported by technical skill; it is generally trenchant and ironic in its criticism of American life and received ideas, and in its frank sensuality alike.

Dugan grew up in Jamaica, Queens in New York City and served in World War II, experiences which entered his poetry though he avoided simple autobiography or confession. He later lived in Truro on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, where he directed the Fine Arts Work Center and was a mentor and teacher to younger poets for decades.

Dugan's work was published in successive numbered collections under the simple title Poems.

Alan Dugan was married to the artist Judith Shahn. He died on September 3, 2003, of pneumonia at age 80.

Drunken Memories Of Anne Sexton

The first and last time I met
my ex-lover Anne Sexton was at
a protest poetry reading against
some anti-constitutional war in Asia
when some academic son of a bitch,
to test her reputation as a drunk,
gave her a beer glass full of wine
after our reading. She drank
it all down while staring me
full in the face and then said
"I don't care what you think,
you know," as if I was
her ex-what, husband, lover,
what? And just as I
was just about to say I
loved her, I was, what,
was, interrupted by my beautiful enemy
Galway Kinnell, who said to her
"Just as I was told, your eyes,
you have one blue, one green"
and there they were, the two
beautiful poets, staring at
each others' beautiful eyes
as I drank the lees of her wine.

Alan Dugan

Elegy

I know but will not tell
you, Aunt Irene, why there
are soap suds in the whiskey:
Uncle Robert had to have
A drink while shaving.

Alan Dugan

Fabrication Of Ancestors

For old Billy Dugan, shot in the ass in the Civil War, my father said.

The old wound in my ass
has opened up again, but I
am past the prodigies
of youth's campaigns, and weep
where I used to laugh
in war's red humors, half
in love with silly-assed pains
and half not feeling them.
I have to sit up with
an indoor unsittable itch
before I go down late
and weeping to the storm-
cellar on a dirty night
and go to bed with the worms.
So pull the dirt up over me
and make a family joke
for Old Billy Blue Balls,
the oldest private in the world
with two ass-holes and no
place more to go to for a laugh
except the last one. Say:
The North won the Civil War
without much help from me
although I wear a proof
of the war's obscenity.

Alan Dugan

How We Heard The Name

The river brought down
dead horses, dead men
and military debris,
indicative of war
or official acts upstream,
but it went by, it all
goes by, that is the thing
about the river. Then
a soldier on a log
went by. He seemed drunk
and we asked him Why
had he and this junk
come down to us so
from the past upstream.
"Friends," he said, "the great
Battle of Granicus
has just been won
by all of the Greeks except
the Lacedaemonians and
myself: this is a joke
between me and a man
named Alexander, whom
all of you ba-bas
will hear of as a god."

Alan Dugan

Internal Migration: On Being On Tour

As an American traveler I have
to remember not to get actionably mad
about the way things are around here.
Tomorrow I'll be a thousand miles away
from the way it is around here. I will
keep my temper, I will not kill the dog
next door, nor will I kill the next-door wife,
both of whom are crazy and aggressive
and think they live at the center of culture
like everyone else in this college town.
This is because I'm leaving, I'm taking off
by car, by light plane, by jet, by taxicab,
for some place else a thousand miles away,
so I caution myself: control your rage,
even if it causes a slight heart attack.
Stay out of jail tonight before you leave,
and don't get obstreperous in transit tomorrow
so as to stay out of jail on arrival tomorrow night.
Think: the new handcuffs are sharp inside
and meant to cut the wrists. You're not too old
to be raped in their filthy overcrowded jails
and you'll lose your glasses and false teeth.
How would you eat, study and be
a traveling lecturer if you got out alive and sane?
So remember to leave this place peacefully,
it's only Asshole State University at Nowheresville,
and remember to get to the next place peacefully,
it's only Nowhere State University at Assholesville
and you must travel from place to place for food and shelter.

Alan Dugan

Love Song: I And Thou

Nothing is plumb, level, or square:
the studs are bowed, the joists
are shaky by nature, no piece fits
any other piece without a gap
or pinch, and bent nails
dance all over the surfacing
like maggots. By Christ
I am no carpenter. I built
the roof for myself, the walls
for myself, the floors
for myself, and got
hung up in it myself. I
danced with a purple thumb
at this house-warming, drunk
with my prime whiskey: rage.
Oh I spat rage's nails
into the frame-up of my work:
it held. It settled plumb,
level, solid, square and true
for that great moment. Then
it screamed and went on through,
skewing as wrong the other way.
God damned it. This is hell,
but I planned it, I sawed it,
I nailed it, and I
will live in it until it kills me.
I can nail my left palm
to the left-hand crosspiece but
I can't do everything myself.
I need a hand to nail the right,
a help, a love, a you, a wife.

Alan Dugan

Monologue Of A Commercial Fisherman

"If you work a body of water and a body of woman
you can take fish out of one and children out of the other
for the two kinds of survival. The fishing is good,
both kinds are adequate in pleasures and yield,
but the hard work and the miseries are killing;
it is a good life if life is good. If not, not.
You are out in the world and in in the world,
having it both ways: it is sportive and prevenient living
combined, although you have to think about the weathers
and the hard work and the miseries are what I said.
It runs on like water, quickly, under the boat,
then slowly like the sand dunes under the house.
You survive by yourself by the one fish for a while
and then by the other afterward when you run out.
You run out a hooky life baited with good times,
and whether the catch is caught or not is a question
for those who go fishing for men or among them for things."

Alan Dugan

Nomenclature

My mother never heard of Freud
and she decided as a little girl
that she would call her husband Dick
no matter what his first name was
and did. He called her Ditty. They
called me Bud, and our generic names
amused my analyst. That must, she said,
explain the crazy times I had in bed
and quoted Freud: "Life is pain."
"What do women want?" and "My
prosthesis does not speak French."

Alan Dugan

On A Seven-Day Diary

Oh I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
and ate and talked and went to sleep.
Then I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
from work and ate and slept.
Then I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
and ate and watched a show and slept.
Then I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
and ate steak and went to sleep.
Then I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
and ate and fucked and went to sleep.
Then it was Saturday, Saturday, Saturday!
Love must be the reason for the week!
We went shopping! I saw clouds!
The children explained everything!
I could talk about the main thing!
What did I drink on Saturday night
that lost the first, best half of Sunday?
The last half wasn't worth this 'word.'
Then I got up and went to work
and worked and came back home
from work and ate and went to sleep,
refreshed but tired by the weekend.

Alan Dugan

On Being A Householder

I live inside of a machine
or machines. Every time one
goes off another starts. Why
don't I go outside and sleep
on the ground. It is because
I'm scared of the open night
and stars looking down at me
as God's eyes, full of questions;
and when I do sleep out alone
I wake up soaking wet
with the dew-fall and am
being snuffed at by a female fox
who stinks from being skunked.
Also there are carrion insects
climbing my private parts. Therefore
I would find shelter in houses,
rented or owned. Anything that money
can build or buy is better than
the nothing of the sky at night,
the stars being the visible past.

Alan Dugan

On Hurricane Jackson

Now his nose's bridge is broken, one eye
will not focus and the other is a stray;
trainers whisper in his mouth while one ear
listens to itself, clenched like a fist;
generally shadowboxing in a smoky room,
his mind hides like the aching boys
who lost a contest in the Panhellenic games
and had to take the back roads home,
but someone else, his perfect youth,
laureled in newsprint and dollar bills,
triumphs forever on the great white way
to the statistical Sparta of the champs.

Alan Dugan

On Looking For Models

The trees in time
have something else to do
besides their treeing. What is it.
I'm a starving to death
man myself, and thirsty, thirsty
by their fountains but I cannot drink
their mud and sunlight to be whole.
I do not understand these presences
that drink for months
in the dirt, eat light,
and then fast dry in the cold.
They stand it out somehow,
and how, the Botanists will tell me.
It is the "something else" that bothers
me, so I often go back to the forests.

Alan Dugan

On The Civil War On The East Coast Of The United States Of North America 1860-64

Because of the unaccountable spirit of the troops
oh we were marched as we were never marched before
and flanked them off from home. Stupid Meade
was after them, head on to tail, but we convinced
him, finally, to flank, flank, cut off their head.
He finally understood, the idiot, and got a fort
named after him, for wisdom. He probably thought
Lee would conquer Washington from Appomattox
if he, Meade, should march his infantry behind
him, Lee. Ah well, the unaccountable spirit of the troops
triumphed, Meade got his fort, Grant got his presidency,
Sherman got his motto, what was it? War is heck?, Lee got a military school
for the education of young Southern gentlemen, and the Union
Army was taken over by Southern noncommissioned officers
in the wars against the Indians to the west. I know all
about this, I know who won, I served under them
for three hundred and fifty years in World War II,
just long enough not to be called a rookie but a veteran,
and realized the rank and order of my enemies:
first, the West Point officers; second, the red-neck sergeants;
third, the Nazis and perhaps the Japanese. I won
all of these wars as a private soldier, for a while,
and am happy to have done so: without me
Hitler and Hirohito would be ruling the world
instead of America and Russia, but I still will not
drive through Georgia with New York license plates.

Alan Dugan

Plague Of Dead Sharks

Who knows whether the sea heals or corrodes?
The wading, wintered pack-beasts of the feet
slough off, in spring, the dead rind of the shoes'
leather detention, the big toe's yellow horn
shines with a natural polish, and the whole
person seems to profit. The opposite appears
when dead sharks wash up along the beach
for no known reason. What is more built
for winning than the swept-back teeth,
water-finished fins, and pure bad eyes
these old, efficient forms of appetite
are dressed in? Yet it looks as if the sea
digested what it wished of them with viral ease
and threw up what was left to stink and dry.
If this shows how the sea approaches life
in its propensity to feed as animal entire,
then sharks are comforts, feet are terrified,
but they vacation in the mystery and why not?
Who knows whether the sea heals or corrodes?:
what the sun burns up of it, the moon puts back.

Alan Dugan

Poem

After your first poetry reading
I shook hands with you
and got a hard-on. Thank you.
We know that old trees
can not feel a thing
when the green tips burst
through the tough bark in spring,
but that's the way it felt,
that's the Objective Correlative
between us poets, love:
a wholly unexpected pain
of something new breaking out
with something old about it
like your new radical poems
those audible objects of love
breaking out through nerves
as you sweated up on stage,
going raw into painful air
for everyone to know.

Alan Dugan

Prayer

God, I need a job because I need money.
Here the world is, enjoyable with whiskey,
women, ultimate weapons, and class!
But if I have no money, then my wife
gets mad at me, I can't drink well,
the armed oppress me, and no boss
pays me money. But when I work,
Oh I get paid!, the police are courteous,
and I can have a drink and breathe air.
I feel classy. I am where the arms are.
The wife is wife in deed. The world
is interesting!, except I have to be
indoors all day and take shit, and make
weapons to kill outsiders with. I miss
the air and smell that paid work stinks
when done for someone else's profit, so I quit,
enjoy a few flush days in air, drunk, then
I need a job again. I'm caught in a steel cycle.

Alan Dugan

Prison Song

The skin ripples over my body like moon-wooded water,
rearing to escape me. Where could it find another
animal as naked as the one it hates to cover?
Once it told me what was happening outside,
who was attacking, who caressing, and what the air
was doing to feed or freeze me. Now I wake up
dark at night, in a textureless ocean of ignorance,
or fruit bites back and water bruises like a stone.
It's jealousy, because I look for other tools to know
with, and other armor, better girded to my wish.
So let it lie, turn off the clues or try to leave:
sewn on me seamless like those painful shirts
the body-hating saints wore, the sheath of hell
is pierced to my darkness nonetheless: what traitors
labor in my face, what hints they smuggle through
its arching guard! But even in the night it jails,
with nothing but its lies and silences to feed upon,
the jail itself can make a scenery, sing prison songs,
and set off fireworks to praise a homemade day.

Alan Dugan

Remembering An Account Executive

He had a back office in his older brother's
advertising agency and understood the human asshole.
He turned his father's small inheritance over and over
on hemorrhoid ads between three-hour lunches
at the Plaza every day and cocktails at five-thirty
with different dressy women waiting in our front office.
We joked that he fucked them up the ass to make more customers
and were nauseated by him because he picked his ears
with the lead end of his lead pencil as he argued and argued
hemorrhoid copy with us on nauseating Mad. Ave. mornings.
Why argue? It must have been for executive power-feelings
because the copy never changed. Every week, the poor
bleeding assholes bought the shit. When my mind
began to get fucked and go as black as his inner ears
I quit as broke as I began, remembering his prophecy:
that the last working television set in the world
would be showing a hemorrhoid ad for ANUSALL
at Armageddon, that it would have been written
by him, that he would be watching it at 6:00 P.M.
in the bomb-cellar lounge of the Park Plaza Hotel
with a blonde's ass in one hand and a scotch in the other,
and that he would die happy, with his old man's
money intact and his asshole too, unlike us prat-boys.

Alan Dugan

Swing Shift Blues

What is better than leaving a bar
in the middle of the afternoon
besides staying in it or not
having gone into it in the first place
because you had a decent woman to be with?
The air smells particularly fresh
after the stale beer and piss smells.
You can stare up at the whole sky:
it's blue and white and does not
stare back at you like the bar mirror,
and there's Whats-'is-name coming out
right behind you saying, "I don't
believe it, I don't believe it: there
he is, staring up at the fucking sky
with his mouth open. Don't
you realize, you stupid son of a bitch,
that it is a quarter to four
and we have to clock in in
fifteen minutes to go to work?"
So we go to work and do no work
and can even breathe in the Bull's face
because he's been into the other bar
that we don't go to when he's there.

Alan Dugan

Two Quits And A Drum, And Elegy For Drinkers

1. ON ASPHALT: NO GREENS

Quarry out the stone
of land, cobble the beach,
wall surf, name it "street,"
allow no ground or green
cover for animal sins,
but let opacity of sand
be glass to keep the heat
outside, the senses in.
Then, when time's Drunk,
reeling to death, provokes
god's favor as a fool,
oh let a lamp post grow
out of its absence, bend,
heavy with care, and bloom
light. Let a curb extrude
a comfortable fault. Let
"street" become a living room.
Comfortably seated, lit
by the solicitude of "lamp,"
the Drunk and street are one.
They say, "Let's have no dirt:
bulldoze the hills into
their valleys: make it plain.
Then take the mountains down
and let their decks of slate
be dealt out flat grey.
Let their mating seams
be tarred against the weeds
by asphalt, by the night's
elixir of volcanoes hotly poured."
Then the soulless port at night
is made a human, and the Drunk
god: no one else is here
to be so but who cares?

2. PORTRAIT AGAINST WOMEN

Bones, in his falling,
must have hit the skin
between themselves and stone,
but distances of wine
were his upholstery
against the painful crime
of lying in the street,
since "God protects them."
He rolled onto his back,
his right hand in his fly,
and gargled open-mouthed,
showing the white of an eye:
it did not see the sign
raised on the proper air
that read: "Here lies
a god-damned fool. Beware."
No: his hand, his woman, on
the dry root of his sex,
debates it: deformed by wine
and fantasy, the wreck
of infant memory is there,
of how the garden gate
slammed at the words, "Get
out you god-damned bum,"
and so he was, since she,
goddess, mother, and wife,
spoke and it was the fact.
Her living hair came out
gray in his hand, her teeth
went false at his kiss,
and her solid flesh went slack
like mother's. "Now, lady,
I am sick and out of socks,
so save me: I am pure although
my hand is on my cock."
Then he could rise up young
out of his vagrancy
in whole unwilling reform
and shuck the fallen one,
his furlough in this street
redeemed by her grace.

There would be the grass
to lay her on, the quench
of milk behind the taste of wine,
and laughter in a dreamed
jungle of love behind
a billboard that could read:
"This is YOUR Garden:
Please keep it clean."

3. COURAGE. EXCEED.

A beggar with no legs below
the middle of his knees
walked down Third Avenue
on padded sockets, on
his telescoped or
anti-stilted legs
repeating, "Oh beautiful
faspacious skies!" upon
a one-man band: a bass
drum on roller-skates,
a mouth-high bugle clamped
to it, and cymbals interlocked
inside a fate of noise. He
flew the American flag
for children on a stick
stuck in a veteran's hat,
and offered pencils. He
was made of drunks' red eyes.
He cried, "Courage! Exceed!"
He was collapsed in whole
display. Drunkards, for this
and with his pencil I
put down his words drunk:
"Stand! Improvise!"

4. ELEGY FOR DRINKERS

What happened to the drunks
I used to know, the prodigals

who tried their parents' help
too far? Some misers of health
have aged out dry; the rest
are sick and out of socks,
their skin-tight anklebones
blue as the mussel shells
that rolled in Naxos' surf
when Bacchus danced ashore
and kicked them all to hell.

Oh gutter urinal,
be Dirce's holy stream,
so lightning out of Zeus
can rage on Semele,
invited! Permit her son,
issuant of His thigh,
to rule her family
as Bromios, god of wine!

Oh Dionisos, good god
of memory and sleep,
you grace the paper bag,
stuck in the fork of a crutch,
that holds the secret sons
and furniture of bums,
since wine is the cure of wine.
It's thanks to you that I,
in my condition, am
still possible and praising: I
am drunk today, but what
about tomorrow? I burnt
my liver to you for a drink,
so pay me for my praises:
for thirty-seven cents, for
the price of a pint of lees,
I would praise wine, your name,
and how your trouble came
out of the east to Thebes:
you taught the women wine
and tricked King Pentheus

to mask as one of them:
because his father died
to all appeals for help,
the rending penalty,
death at his mother's hands!,
still fills The Bowery
with prodigals of hope:
they pray for lightning and
a dance to their god damn,
since wine is the cure of wine
and wine the cure wine cured
and wine the cure of wine.

Alan Dugan

Untitled Poem - I

Once, one of my students read a book we had.
She was doing a history assignment on
the decline and fall of the Roman Empire
and crying. When I asked her why
she said Because. All those people died.
I said that if you start to cry for the dead
You won't have much time for anything else.
Besides, after all the city people were killed
or died off, because their cultures got too high,
the barbarians kept some peasants alive
for their food value. Some barbarian raped
some peasant woman who produced
a child who ultimately produced you
and me, so there is this family continuity,
so don't cry, it's obvious, look around!
This is the reason why we Americans
are a nation of peasants and barbarians,

Alan Dugan

Untitled Poem - Ii

Speciously individual
like a solid piece of spit
floating in a cuspidor
I dream of free bravery
but am a social being.
I should do something
to get out of here
but float around in the culture
wondering what it will grow.

Alan Dugan

Wall, Cave, And Pillar Statements, After Asoka

In order to perfect all readers
the statements should be carved
on rock walls, on cave walls,
and on the sides of pillars so
the charm of their instruction can
affect the mountain climbers near
the cliffs, the plainsmen near
the pillars, and the city people near
the caves they go to on vacations.

The statements should, and in a fair
script, spell out the right text and gloss
of the Philosopher's jocular remark. Text:
"Honesty is the best policy." Gloss:
"He means not 'best' but 'policy,'
(this is the joke of it) whereas in fact
Honesty is Honesty, Best
is Best, and Policy is Policy,
the three terms being not
related, but here loosely allied.
What is more important is that 'is'
is, but the rocklike truth of the text
resides in the 'the'. The 'the' is The.
By this means the amusing sage
has raised or caused to be raised
the triple standard in stone:
the single is too simple for life,
the double is mere degrading hypocrisy,
but the third combines the first two
in a possible way, and contributes
something unsayable of its own:
this is the pit, nut, seed, or stone
of the fruit when the fruit has been
digested:
It is good to do good for the wrong
reason, better to do good for the good
reason, and best of all to do good
good: i.e. when the doer and doee
and whatever passes between them

are beyond all words like 'grace'
or 'anagogic insight,' or definitions like
'particular instance of a hoped-at-law,'
and which the rocks alone can convey.
This is the real reason for the rock walls,
the cave walls and pillars, and not the base
desires for permanence and display
that the teacher's conceit suggests."

That is the end of the statements, but,
in order to go on a way after the end
so as to make up for having begun
after the beginning, and thus to come around
to it in order to include the whole thing,
add: "In some places the poignant slogan,
'Morality is a bad joke like everything else,'
may be written or not, granted that space
exists for the vulgar remarks, the dates,
initials and hearts of lovers, and all
other graffiti of the prisoners of this world."

Alan Dugan