

Classic Poetry Series

David Ignatow
- poems -

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David Ignatow(7 February 1914 - 17 November 1997)

Born in Brooklyn on February 7, 1914, and spent most of his life in the New York City area.

Career

Ignatow began his professional career as a businessman. After committing wholly to poetry, Ignatow worked as an editor of American Poetry Review, Analytic, Beloit Poetry Journal, and Chelsea Magazine, and as poetry editor of The Nation. He taught at the New School for Social Research, the University of Kentucky, the University of Kansas, Vassar College, York College of the City University of New York, New York University, and Columbia University. He was president of the Poetry Society of America from 1980 to 1984 and poet-in-residence at the Walt Whitman Birthplace Association in 1987. He died on November 17, 1997, at his home in East Hampton, New York.

Awards

Mr. Ignatow's many honors include a Bollingen Prize, two Guggenheim fellowships, the John Steinbeck Award, and a National Institute of Arts and Letters award "for a lifetime of creative effort." He received the Shelley Memorial Award (1966), the Frost Medal (1992), and the William Carlos Williams Award (1997) of the Poetry Society of America.

Against The Evidence

As I reach to close each book
lying open on my desk, it leaps up
to snap at my fingers. My legs
won't hold me, I must sit down.
My fingers pain me
where the thick leaves snapped together
at my touch.
All my life
I've held books in my hands
like children, carefully turning
their pages and straightening out
their creases. I use books
almost apologetically. I believe
I often think their thoughts for them.
Reading, I never know where theirs leave off
and mine begin. I am so much alone
in the world, I can observe the stars
or study the breeze, I can count the steps
on a stair on the way up or down,
and I can look at another human being
and get a smile, knowing
it is for the sake of politeness.
Nothing must be said of estrangement
among the human race and yet
nothing is said at all
because of that.
But no book will help either.
I stroke my desk,
its wood so smooth, so patient and still.
I set a typewriter on its surface
and begin to type
to tell myself my troubles.
Against the evidence, I live by choice.

David Ignatow

An Ecology

We drop in the evening like dew
upon the ground and the living
feel it on their faces. Death
soft, moist everywhere upon us,
soon to cover the living
as they drop. This explains
the ocean and the sun.

David Ignatow

An Illusion

She was saying mad things:
'To hell with the world!
Love is all you need! Go on
and get it! What are you
waiting for!' and she walked,
more like shuffled up the street,
her eyes fixed upon the distance.
People stepped self-consciously
out of her way. Straight up
stood her hair, wild.

What are you waiting for,
snarled from her lips.
it seemed directed to herself
really, to someone inside
with whom she fought.
The shredded hem of her dress
rustled around her.

David Ignatow

At This Moment

I'm very pleased to be a body. Can there be someone without a body?
As you hold mine I feel firmly assured that bodies are the right thing
and I think all life is a body. I'm happy about trees, grass and water,
especially with the sun shining on it. I slip into it, a summer pleasure.

I have hurt the body. That's when I know I need it most in its whole
condition. If I could prove it to you by giving pain you would agree
but I prefer you with your body pressed to mine as if to say it is how
we know. Think, when two must separate how sad it is for each then
having to find another way to affirm their bodies. Knock one against
another or tree or rock and there's your pain. Now we have our arms
filled with each other. Could we not grow old in this posture and be
buried as one body which others would do for us tenderly?

David Ignatow

Coupling

Wherever he looks, standing still in the city,
are people born of coupling, walking in gray suits
and ties, in long dresses and coiffed hair,
speaking elegantly, of themselves and of each other,
forgetting for the moment their origin,
perhaps wishing not to know or to remember.
They dress as if having been born in a clothing store.

They were born of men and women naked
and gyrating from the hips
and with movements up and down
and with climactic yells,
as if losing their lives
in the pleasure and so glad,
so wildly glad.

From this rises the child
from between the wet crotch, blood and mucus,
He stands upright and pronounces himself
humankind and steps from bed and clothes himself
in a gray suit and from the next room of birth
steps a woman in a long dress. They meet
in the corridor and arm in arm walk its length
in search of one room, empty of inhabitants
but prepared for them.

David Ignatow

Dilemma

Whatever we do, whether we light
strangers' cigarettes—it may turn out
to be a detective wanting to know who is free
with a light on a lonely street nights—
or whether we turn away and get a knife
planted between our shoulders for our discourtesy;
whatever we do—whether we marry for love
and wake up to find love is a task,
or whether for convenience to find love
must be won over, or we are desperate—
whatever we do; save by dying,
and there too we are caught,
by being planted too close to our parents.

David Ignatow

Earth Hard

Earth hard to my heels
bear me up like a child
standing on its mother's belly.
I am a surprised guest to the air

David Ignatow

For My Daughter

When I die choose a star
and name it after me
that you may know
I have not abandoned
or forgotten you.
You were such a star to me,
following you through birth
and childhood, my hand
in your hand.

When I die
choose a star and name it
after me so that I may shine
down on you, until you join
me in darkness and silence
together.

David Ignatow

Here In Bed

Here in bed behind a brick wall
I can make order and meaning,
but how do I begin? How do I
emerge without panic
to the sounds and mass
of people in the street?

Are they human who stare
as I pass by, as if sizing me up
for a mugging or a filthy proposition,
and am I human to have to be
frightened and on guard?

It's people I'm afraid of, afraid
of my own kind, knowing their angers
and schemes and violent needs, knowing
through knowledge of myself
that I have learned to resist,
but when I can't I have seen
the havoc I have made.

It's this, knowing their desperate motives,
as I have known mine, I'm afraid of
in them. I hide upon a bed
behind a brick wall and listen
to engines roaring up and down
the street and to voices shouting
to one another and find no meaning
or order in them, as there is none
in me when I am free of self-restraint.

The bed is my victory over fear.
The bed returns me to my self
as I was young and dreaming
of the beauty of the trees
and faces of people.

David Ignatow

I Close My Eyes

I close my eyes like a good little boy at night in bed,
as I was told to do by my mother when she lived,
and before bed I brush my teeth and slip on my pajamas,
as I was told, and look forward to tomorrow.

I do all things required of me to make me a citizen of sterling worth.
I keep a job and come home each evening for dinner. I arrive at the
same time on the same train to give my family a sense of order.

I obey traffic signals. I am cordial to strangers, I answer my
mail promptly. I keep a balanced checking account. Why can't I
live forever?

David Ignatow

I Dream

I dream I am lying in the mud on my back and staring up into the sky. Which do I prefer, since I have the power to fly into the blue slate of air? It is summer. I decide quickly that by lying face up I have a view of the sky I could not get by flying in it, while I'd be missing the mud.

David Ignatow

If We Could Be Brought

If we could be brought to the surface
like a gleaming fish and served for supper,
if we could eat and swallow our own life
to make a good meal, if we could go fishing
for ourselves and feed on the gleaming
swimmer below the surface of our skin-
the fish that is our slippery life
and death.

David Ignatow

In A Dream

at fifty I approach myself,
eighteen years of age,
seated despondently on the concrete steps
of my father's house,
wishing to be gone from there
into my own life,
and I tell my young self,
Nothing will turn out right,
you'll want to avenge yourself,
on those close to you especially,
and they will want to die
of shock and grief. You will fall
to pleading and tears of self-pity,
filled with yourself, a passionate stranger.
My eighteen-year-old self stands up
from the concrete steps and says,
Go to hell,
and I walk off.

David Ignatow

Information

This tree has two million and seventy-five thousand leaves.
Perhaps I missed a leaf or two but I do feel triumphant
at having persisted in counting by hand branch by branch
and marked down on paper with pencil each total.
Adding them up was a pleasure I could understand;
I did something on my own that was not dependent on others,
and to count leaves is not less meaningful than to count the stars,
as astronomers are always doing.
They want the facts to be sure they have them all.
It would help them to know whether the world is finite.
I discovered one tree that is finite.
I must try counting the hairs on my head, and you too.
We could swap information.

David Ignatow

It Is

It is heart-rending to know a kiss
cannot cure the world of its illnesses,
nor can your happiness, nor your tragedy
of being a discrete person, for the bodies
fall like rain into the ground
and merge only to make an ocean
of bones and closed eyes, our identities
merged, as we had wanted
when we were persons
in each other's sight and touch.

David Ignatow

Listening

You wept in your mother's arms
and I knew that from then on
I was to forget myself.

Listening to your sobs,
I was resolved against my will
to do well by us
and so I said, without thinking,
in great panic, To do wrong
in one's own judgment,
though others thrive by it,
is the right road to blessedness.
Not to submit to error
is in itself wrong
and pride.

Standing beside you,
I took an oath
to make your life simpler
by complicating mine
and what I always thought
would happen did:
I was lifted up in joy.

David Ignatow

Melpomene In Manhattan

As she walked she would look back
over her shoulder and trip
upon sidewalk cracks or bump
into people to whom she would apologize
profusely, her head still turned.
One could hear her murmur to herself
tearfully, as though filled with a yearning
to recover what she was leaving behind
as if she would preserve it
or do for it what she had neglected
out of ignorance or oversight
or from sheer meanness and spite
or simple helplessness to do better,
her voice beginning to keen
as she tripped or steered blindly
into the gutter

David Ignatow

Midnight

It's midnight, the house silent,
in the distance a musical instrument
being played softly. I am alone.
It's as if the world has come to an end
on a low musical note

David Ignatow

Moving Picture

When two take gas
by mutual consent
and the cops come in
when the walls are broken down
and the doctor pays respects
by closing the books
and the neighbors stand about
sniffing and afraid
and the papers run a brief
under a whiskey ad
and the news is read
eating ice cream or a fruit
and the paper is used
to wrap peelings
and the garbage man
dumps the barrel
into the truck
and the paper flares
in the furnace and sinks back
charred and is scooped up
for mud flats and pressed down
by steam rollers for hard ground
and a house on it
for two to enter

David Ignatow

My Skeleton, My Rival

Interesting that I have to live with my skeleton.
It stands, prepared to emerge, and I carry it
with me—this other thing I will become at death,
and yet it keeps me erect and limber in my walk,
my rival.

What will the living see of me
if they should open my grave but my bones
that will stare at them through hollow sockets
and bared teeth.

I write this to warn my friends
not to be shocked at my changed attitude
toward them, but to be aware
that I have it in me to be someone
other than I am, and I write to ask forgiveness
that death is not wholesome for friendships,
that bones do not talk, have no quarrel with me,
do not even know I exist.

A machine called skeleton will take my place
in the minds of others when I am dead
among the living, and that machine
will make it obvious that I have died
to be identified by bones
that have no speech, no thought, no mind
to speak of having let themselves be carried
once around in me, as at my service
at the podium or as I lay beside my love
or when I held my child at birth
or embraced a friend or shook a critic's hand
or held a pen to sign a check or book
or wrote a farewell letter to a love
or held my penis at the bowl
or lay my hand upon my face at the mirror
and approved of it.

There is Ignatow, it will be said,
looking down inside the open grave.
I'll be somewhere in my poems, I think,
to be mistaken for my bones, but There's Ignatow
will be said. I say to those who persist,
just read what I have written.
I'll be there, held together by another kind
of structure, of thought and imagery,
mind and matter, love and longing, tensions
opposite, such as the skeleton requires
to stand upright, to move with speed,
to sit with confidence, my friend the skeleton
and I its friend, shielding it from harm.

David Ignatow

On Freedom

In a dream I'm no longer in love. I breathe deeply this sense of freedom, and I vow never again to seal myself in, but I am reminded it is myself I love also and that too is a kind of sealed condition. I am committed to taking care of my body and its home accommodations, its clothes and neat appearance that I admire in the mirror, yet I would like to know what it would be like freed of brushing my teeth, washing my neck and face and between my toes. I'd like to know, as I neglect to move my bowels, and stay away from food that could sustain my health, and do not change my underwear, and let odors rise from my crotch and armpit. I stick out my tongue at the image in the mirror showing me my ragged beard and sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, free of my self-love at last, and I sink onto the bathroom floor, feeling life begin to seep out of me, I who haven't eaten since last month. I'm dying and I'm free.

David Ignatow

Permanence

I am leaving earth with little knowledge of it,
without having visited its great cities and lands
I was here for a moment, it seems, to praise,
and now that I am leaving I am astounded

So what does cruelty mean in these circumstance
and what does triumph, empire and domination,
but waves upon the still sea beneath.
And what does failure mean but to sink below

David Ignatow

Play Again

Late in 1962 New York newspapers reported the story of a nine-year-old child being raped on a roof, and hurled twenty stories to the ground.

I draw near to the roof's edge
and seek someone to lift
and hurl me out into vacant air.
I want to turn over and over
rapidly in my plunge, my mouth
open to scream but air rushing
upwards jams my throat.
I am seeking the peace
I never once gave up on
and this is the final way to find it. The living
share me among them. They taste
me on the ground, they taste me
in the air descending. They taste
me screaming, nine years old.
I have playmates
and I leave behind my skull
in their dreams, hands to mouths.
It is because they have no help,
as if to hint to them the way,
if they would understand.
When we played it was to love each other
in games. Play again and love me
until I really die, when you are old
on a flight of stairs.

David Ignatow

Rescue The Dead

Finally, to forgo love is to kiss a leaf,
is to let rain fall nakedly upon your head,
is to respect fire,
is to study man's eyes and his gestures
as he talks,
is to set bread upon the table
and a knife discreetly by,
is to pass through crowds
like a crowd of oneself.
Not to love is to live.

To love is to be led away
into a forest where the secret grave
is dug, singing, praising darkness
under the trees.

To live is to sign your name,
is to ignore the dead,
is to carry a wallet
and shake hands.

To love is to be a fish.
My boat wallows in the sea.
You who are free,
rescue the dead.

David Ignatow

Ritual One

As I enter the theatre the play is going on.
I hear the father say to the son on stage,
You've taken the motor apart.
The son replies, The roof is leaking.
The father retorts, The tire is flat.
Tiptoeing down the aisle, I find my seat,
edge my way in across a dozen kneecaps
as I tremble for my sanity.
I have heard doomed voices calling on god the electrode.
Sure enough, as I start to sit
a scream rises from beneath me.
It is one of the players.
If I come down, I'll break his neck,
caught between the seat and the backrest.
Now the audience and the players on stage,
their heads turned towards me, are waiting
for the sound of the break. Must I?
Those in my aisle nod slowly, reading my mind,
their eyes fixed on me, and I understand
that each has done the same.
Must I kill this man as the price of my admission
to this play? His screams continue loud and long.
I am at a loss as to what to do,
I panic, I freeze.

My training has been to eat the flesh of pig.
I might even have been able to slit a throat.
As a child I witnessed the dead chickens
over a barrel of sawdust absorbing their blood.
I then brought them in a bag to my father
who sold them across his counter. Liking him,
I learned to like people and enjoy their company too,
which of course brought me to this play.
But how angry I become.
Now everybody is shouting at me to sit down,
sit down or I'll be thrown out.
The father and son have stepped off stage
and come striding down the aisle side by side.

They reach me, grab me by the shoulder
and force me down. I scream, I scream,
as if to cover the sound of the neck breaking.

All through the play I scream
and am invited on stage to take a bow.
I lose my senses and kick the actors in the teeth.

There is more laughter
and the actors acknowledge my performance with a bow.
How should I understand this?
Is it to say that if I machine-gun the theatre
from left to right they will respond with applause
that would only gradually diminish with each death?
I wonder then whether logically I should kill myself
too out of admiration. A question indeed,
as I return to my seat and observe a new act
of children playfully aiming their kicks
at each other's groins.

David Ignatow

Self-Employed: For Harvey Shapiro

I stand and listen, head bowed,
to my inner complaint.
Persons passing by think
I am searching for a lost coin.
You're fired, I yell inside
after an especially bad episode.
I'm letting you go without notice
or terminal pay. You just lost
another chance to make good.
But then I watch myself standing at the exit,
depressed and about to leave,
and wave myself back in wearily,
for who else could I get in my place
to do the job in dark, airless conditions?

David Ignatow

That's The Sum Of It

I don't know which to mourn. Both have died on me, my wife and my car. I feel strongly about my car, but I am also affected by my wife. Without my car, I can't leave the house to keep myself from being alone. My wife gave me two children, both of whom, of course, no longer live with us, as was to be expected, as we in our youth left our parents behind. With my car, I could visit my children, when they are not too busy.

Before she died, my wife urged me to find another woman. It's advice I'd like to take up but not without a car. Without a car. I cannot find myself another woman. That's the sum of it.

David Ignatow

The Bagel

I stopped to pick up the bagel
rolling away in the wind,
annoyed with myself
for having dropped it
as if it were a portent.
Faster and faster it rolled,
with me running after it
bent low, gritting my teeth,
and I found myself doubled over
and rolling down the street
head over heels, one complete somersault
after another like a bagel
and strangely happy with myself.

David Ignatow

The Journey

I am looking for a past
I can rely on
in order to look to death
with equanimity.
What was given me:
my mother's largeness
to protect me,
my father's regularity
in coming home from work
at night, his opening the door
silently and smiling,
pleased to be back
and the lights on
in all the rooms
through which I could run
freely or sit at ease
at table and do my homework
undisturbed: love arranged
as order directed at the next day.
Going to bed was a journey.

David Ignatow

Two

The steam hammer pounds with a regularity on steel I should envy. Neither the hammer nor the steel seems to be suffering from this terrible meeting between them, proving something vaguely pointed, that some things must be done, regardless of cost, and finally the cost too is absorbed in the doing that has become a ritual between two fated opponents.

David Ignatow

Two Friends

I have something to tell you.
I'm listening.
I'm dying.
I'm sorry to hear.
I'm growing old.
It's terrible.
It is. I thought you should know
of course and I'm sorry. Keep in touch.
I will and you too.
And let know what's new.
Certainly, though it can't be much.
And stay well.
And you too.
And go slow.
And you too.

David Ignatow

Walt Whitman In The Civil War Hospitals

Prescient, my hands soothing
their foreheads, by my love
I earn them. in their presence
I am wretched as death. They smile
to me of love. They cheer me
and I smile. These are stones
in the catapulting world;
they fly, bury themselves in flesh,
in a wall, in earth; in midair
break against each other
and are without sound.
I sent them catapulting.
They outflew my voice
towards vacant spaces,
but I have called them farther,
to the stillness beyond,
to death which I have praised.

David Ignatow

Without Sexual Attraction

Without sexual attraction, there is
the brutal movement of the sea.
The face peers out of its skeletal frame
and hands reach like bone.

Without love, the streets
are hollow sounding
with wooden, hurried steps,
voices like caverns of death.
We pass each other as trains do,
whistling screams.

David Ignatow