

“LIKE A THUNDERSTORM”:
A SHELVED STORY OF LOVE AND LITERATURE

The library on the top floor of my house in Luxembourg has over a thousand volumes in it: books that range from a wall’s worth of guidebooks to pagan treatises and Buddhist chakra guides, from a twenty-volume edition of the Oxford English Dictionary to books about ancient art and architecture. Some of the library is older than I am: when I was in elementary school and sick enough to stay home, my father would take the day off work and put Mars bars in the freezer, and we would munch on the cold candy while picking out books to read aloud and reorganizing the library (I advocated a rainbow color-ordered system). Most of the collection is second-hand: I know intimately the interior of every Oxfam bookshop in London and Canterbury. While my mother and my sister go clothes shopping or to an art gallery, my father and I will spend hours poring through the stacks. After all, this is my inheritance, and I have helped to make it my own.

The library is eclectic and far-reaching, but all the books have their designated places. The guidebooks are grouped by continent; the novels are in alphabetical order by authors’ last names; the history books are chronologically ordered. The place where no system holds sway is the poetry collection, which occupies my four favorite shelves in the world. There is no order here: free-verse volumes mingle with poems written in form; biographies of poets sit next to collections of letters. The books are old, or new, or somewhere in between: my collected Zbigniew Herbert was translated only recently by Alissa Valles, while the collected Robert Frost is spattered with baby milk formula from an unfortunate explosion in 1996. Valuable first editions are not placed more prominently than the generic collected works.

It may seem that the poetry collection lacks both a coherent structure and a coherent theme, but I would like to focus on the most important thread that connects all the texts and drives us to collect them: love. There is nothing on those shelves that is not loved. I believe that one should be passionate about poetry—about prose, too—but about poetry in particular. My favorite poet said, “A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language,” and

this applies equally as well to the reader of poetry. Poetry's brevity, the distilled nature of it, lends itself to bursts of intensity and passion. There is none of the novel's long-haul trudge. W. H. Auden again put it best when he compared the poet, who "can amaze us like a thunderstorm," to the novelist, who must "learn / How to be plain and awkward" and "must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man." Poetry is not dull; it dazzles. Poetry also has an immense power to comfort, if you love and trust it enough. Sylvia Plath said she aimed to write "poems people would remember and repeat to themselves when they were unhappy or sick or couldn't sleep." I have more memories than I can count of climbing the stairs at midnight, woken by some bad dream, and sitting cross-legged in front of the poetry collection. I would read out loud to myself, and sometimes fall asleep up there.

Because the only entrance requirement is love, the collection is prone to over-representation, under-representation, and indulgence. There are more collected volumes than slim volumes, because when you fall in love with a poet a "selected" volume simply won't do. The books enter and leave the collection by a rigorous process: for specific writers to be placed on the shelves, my father and I will argue passionately over their merits and whether or not they deserve representation. Sometimes I will find a new poet—Wisława Szymborska, Don Paterson, and Zbigniew Herbert being recent examples—and my father will read them on my recommendation and we'll become over-excited and order their collected works and a couple of biographies and keep our eyes out for them in second-hand bookstores. I have always loved to read poetry, and I would buy books with my pocket money from the school book sale or receive them as Christmas gifts. I always insisted, too, that the poetry books that I loved be included in this collection: Shel Silverstein and Naomi Shihab Nye stood next to T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. And why not, if I adored them?

Conversely, some books get exiled when we decide the author isn't as good as we remembered him or her. I fell in love with Elizabeth Bishop this summer and argued that her good friend Robert Lowell was empty and verbose and not worthy to stand next to her on the shelves. He was banished downstairs. If we were collecting twentieth-century American poets, this would make no sense, because Lowell has a place in that collection. He doesn't in this one—at least, not unless we reread and then rehabilitate him, which I am perfectly willing to do, because no decision is final or irreversible. (Again we can look

to Auden on this: he said that the “surest sign that a man has a genuine taste of his own is that he is uncertain of it.”)

This eccentric mechanism of selection begs the question often posed by my mother and sister: Does it really matter what’s on these particular shelves? I would argue that it does. There is a certain satisfaction in having only things that belong in their designated place. I can look at the shelves and feel a surge of excitement that I wouldn’t feel if there were mediocre books alongside my favorites, or poets who didn’t hold my interest, or ones I had never read. (There’s an excitement in the unknown, too, but that’s for a different shelf. The love on these shelves is not the thrill of the chase, but the dopamine swells of early courtship.) Collectors for centuries have known the small truth that each collection—whatever it is—becomes its own discrete thing, takes on a distinct personality. That personality is dependent on the content and the collector’s attitude toward it. It also reflects the tastes, preferences, and passions of its collector. Any collection of French Symbolist poetry will have roughly the same contents, the stock collections—our shelves are unpredictable and singular, like a fingerprint.



English is my first language, and poetry written in English (especially in the twentieth century) is well represented. The love affairs I have with various authors are visible in the composition of the shelves; one of my best-loved collections within the collection consists of five books by W. H. Auden, who has remained a consistent favorite of mine for years now. It began with a poem that we read in English class; I bought his collected poems (a huge brick of a book—he was incredibly prolific—with a close-up of his wonderfully wrinkled face). The short poems were on the whole my favorites, and the collected poems was unwieldy, so I found a 1960s volume, *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957*, that I could carry around with me and mark up. (I love underlining things and labeling stanzas with hearts or exclamation points.) Also on the shelf is a rather unusual biography-cum-tribute of Auden from Littlehampton Books, consisting of testimonials by his friends, family members, and other contemporaries. I particularly enjoyed the anecdotes of Auden’s time at Oxford; the book is a valuable source of Auden’s unofficial quotations, his quirks, and his inspiration for various poems and lines. The two most valuable items

are two first editions, one of *Nones* and one of Auden's last, posthumous collection, *Thank You, Fog*. The former was tucked away in a little bookshop off Charing Cross Road, in London, and I found *Thank You, Fog* in the largest second-hand book store in New York. (The sheer number of first editions on the top floor was amazing, and it was difficult to choose just one. I went with the one that I loved the most.)

There are also books of poems from other countries' literary traditions: volumes in their original languages as well as translations, or side-by-side texts. Since I have lived my whole life in Luxembourg, I have always been surrounded by languages other than English (the average Luxembourger speaks four), and French and German poetry have always been accessible to me. In German class I had to memorize Heinrich Heine's "Die Lorelei"; in French class it was Jacques Prévert's "Déjeuner du Matin." On one of our many forays into London's network of second-hand bookstores, I found a 1950s edition of Charles Baudelaire's iconic collection *Les Fleurs du Mal*. I adored his poems, especially the "Spleen" series, so I researched his Symbolist contemporaries and found the fairly obscure Jules Laforgue. A quick Google search later, I had read some of Laforgue's poems and ordered his collected works, as one does when one falls in love with a poet. When the gorgeous twilight-blue book arrived on a miserable November Sunday, I flicked it open at random to a lamentation of winter's onset, "L'Hiver qui vient", and read the following couplet: "Ah, nuées accourues des côtes de la Manche, / Vous nous avez gâté notre dernier dimanche." The cruel drizzle of a Luxembourgish winter condensed on the attic windows, and I could imagine myself perfectly in Paris with Laforgue, staring melancholically at the lines he had just written. It was an extraordinary experience to discover someone who took the weather as personally as I did, but who transformed his struggles into superb art, by turns hilarious or morbid, and always effortlessly executed.

Turning my attention to the English translation of the poem by Peter Dale, I found that while the French text was vivid, romantic, dynamic, the translation fell flat. It was too literal, it lacked the whimsy and the ironic romance of Laforgue's tone. Even I could do better than that, I thought, and so I attempted it, with a rhyming dictionary, a translation dictionary, and a thesaurus. "L'Hiver qui vient" is both splendid and splendidly difficult: the rhymes are so dense and tricky to translate into rhyme-poor English, and there were many cul-

tural references I needed to research. (Where does the Autan wind originate? What are “sanitary statistics”? What is the English equivalent of French hunting cries?) I experienced the endless jealousy of French rhyming possibilities and the frustration of transferring sublime rhymes into English. I tried to keep Laforgue’s punctuation: the wistful ellipses and melodramatic exclamation marks are essential in creating the tone of the poem. Looking at the style of other poems in the collection helped me get a better sense of Laforgue as a poet and understand what in “L’Hiver qui vient” is irony and what is heart-rending emotional truth.

Once I was pleased with what I had written, I returned to the attic library and came across a translation by Martin Bell in a tiny collaborative Penguin Modern Poets volume that I had overlooked. Bell had taken a completely different route than Dale or me, satirizing the romantic interjections of the poem to make it heavily self-mocking parody. I was fascinated that the three different English translations of this poem—mine, Dale’s, and Bell’s—were so different, and yet when all are read side-by-side, one gets a deeper look at the original poem. Every poem says more than one thing, George Szirtes has said, and translations can’t always convey every facet of a work. In a way, having three translations brought into focus the many aspects of the Laforgue poem. My understanding and appreciation of one volume of my collection was deepened by another.

On a whim I decided to enter the Stephen Spender Prize for Poetry in Translation, administered by the Stephen Spender Trust. It’s the largest translation competition in the United Kingdom, with cash prizes available for under-eighteens. My translation was awarded first place, and I flew from Luxembourg to London to get my prize money and read my poem in front of a terrifyingly large audience. As I stepped down from the podium, breathing heavily from the excitement, a man of about eighty years congratulated me and introduced himself as Alan Brownjohn—a well-known poet contemporary of Geoffrey Hill and Adrien Mitchell. I was slightly starstruck as he commended my translation and told me that a good friend of his had also translated “L’Hiver qui vient” a long time ago. “Have you heard of Martin Bell?” Brownjohn asked.

After the Stephen Spender prize, the proportion of foreign-language books and volumes of translated poetry in my collection increased rapidly. Some of my favorite poets write in languages that I can’t

understand, like Zbigniew Herbert, and I have to rely on translations of their work. The job of the translator is of paramount importance; his or her interpretation can make or break a poem. (As George Szirtes has said, “The brilliant translation of a bad poem can’t help but be a good poem,” and the converse is true, too.) My interest developed into a fully fledged hobby. I found that although translation is very fiddly, very difficult, and very much a mental puzzle, it is endlessly rewarding as it deepens one’s love for the original poem and poet. I bought French, German, and even Spanish poetry to translate. Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann, star-crossed lovers in life (she the daughter of a Nazi, his parents concentration camp victims), joined each other on the shelves. In New York I picked out two beautiful pocket-sized editions by New Directions Books. One was a pink-and-gold selection of Pablo Neruda’s love poems, and the other contained poems from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Book of Hours* (both of these are volumes of love poetry, albeit handling two very different types of love).

Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*, Laforgue’s collected poems (and the translations by Bell and Dale)—these books are important landmarks because they ignited in me a passion for reading translated poetry, which in turn fueled a passion for creating it. My collection now contains many other books of poetry in foreign languages and their translations, but this subdivision can be traced back to these first volumes, the first steps into a new world that would come to feel like home. Not only has the foreign-language poetry in the collection stayed consistent with the collection’s larger commitment to adored literature, but it tells me the story of how I fell in love with poetry.



My poetry collection also tells love stories of a less theoretical and intellectual kind: human love stories, between people and other people instead of between people and pages. One of my favorite books upstairs has always been the collected E. E. Cummings, which was the first book my mother sent to my father when they embarked on their trans-Atlantic courtship. He had proposed after two weeks. They were engaged but hardly knew each other’s histories or hobbies; they had completely different interests and ambitions. My mother knew her rash fiancé loved poetry, though, and so she bought him a volume that she enjoyed and mailed it to him. Cummings connected them

across the Atlantic. My mother left little notes and post-its on certain poems, none of which I could understand when I was younger, because my mother's handwriting is scrawled and because Cummings is difficult to read, even now. I understood almost nothing in that huge book when I was eight or nine (apart from the essential bounciness of "[in Just-]," which I appreciated even then), but I still found the book endlessly romantic and comforting to flick through. Love had transformed that volume of poetry, so that there is not a collected Cummings quite like it anywhere else in the world.

While my wooing English father and American mother didn't veer much from poetry in their native shared language, their trans-Atlantic daughter's love story fittingly springs from poetry in translation. If we pick up the story of my translating career from where I left off earlier—me stepping down from the podium at the Stephen Spender prize ceremony, check in my hand and adrenaline glow on my cheeks—and fast forward twenty minutes, we will see me at the reception, moving toward the refreshments table and a glass of elderflower cordial. A very handsome boy will tap my shoulder and edge me into a corner and say, "I didn't notice the anapest rhythms in your translation until you read it out loud."

I had dated politicians and rugby players, but never a poet. Over dinner he confessed that he had judged me before meeting me because of the lack of capitalization in my translation. He didn't like free verse. He didn't like Symbolists or Sylvia Plath. But that was alright—in fact, it was wonderful. We talked meter for an hour, and form for another; he quoted John Donne to me as he flagged me a taxi. It was a beautiful 1956 edition of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* that I unwrapped two months later when I was back in London visiting my medium-distance boyfriend. I read it on the plane back to Luxembourg, and one line stood out in particular because of its relevance to my situation: "It be too late to kill me so, / Being double dead, going, and bidding go." When I finished reading, the volume took its proud place on the shelf alongside my other all-time favorite books.

Since then, the giving of poetry books has become a ritual between us. After Donne, there was an Auden biography (edited by Stephen Spender, of all people!) and a lovely Rupert Brooke. Sometimes we will shop together; we've been to bookshops in Paris, where he finally invested in some Sylvia Plath, and London, where I dared him to buy a heavily thumbed and rather grimy copy of *The Poetry of Sex*, Sophie

Hannah's electric compilation of erotic poetry across the ages. We are constantly reading to each other: on the subway, lying in the sun by a river, with flashlights in tents. This is what I see on the shelves of my library.



Evelyn Waugh wrote in *Brideshead Revisited*, “I should like to bury something precious in every place where I’ve been happy and then, when I’m old and ugly and miserable, I could come back and dig it up and remember.” That is exactly how I feel about my poetry collection—although I already appreciate the memories and the happiness that the books hold, despite not being old, ugly, or miserable yet. This collection of poetry will continue to grow, to shed books, and to change, for many years to come—for at least as long as I have it, and probably beyond, when I bequeath it to my children along with my mother’s jewelry and the silver fish knives. It will most likely never have a fully coherent or consistent theme, or be a comprehensive representation of a certain period or style. But the books will be bursting off of their shelves with love and all the love stories they contain, and that’s exactly the type of collection that I want to own.

—ANNA LEADER
Class of 2018