

SELECT ONE OF THE FOUR POEMS FOR THIS EVENT. ON CAMERA YOU HAVE 1 MINUTE TO PREPARE YOUR READING.

1) *Morning in the Burned House*

Margaret Atwood

1939 –

In the burned house I am eating breakfast.
You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast,
yet here I am.

The spoon which was melted scrapes against
the bowl which was melted also.
No one else is around.

Where have they gone to, brother and sister,
mother and father? Off along the shore,
perhaps. Their clothes are still on the hangers,

their dishes piled beside the sink,
which is beside the woodstove
with its grate and sooty kettle,

every detail clear,
tin cup and rippled mirror.
The day is bright and songless,

the lake is blue, the forest watchful.
In the east a bank of cloud
rises up silently like dark bread.

I can see the swirls in the oilcloth,
I can see the flaws in the glass,
those flares where the sun hits them.

I can't see my own arms and legs
or know if this is a trap or blessing,
finding myself back here, where everything

in this house has long been over,
kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl,
including my own body,

including the body I had then,
including the body I have now
as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy,

bare child's feet on the scorched floorboards
(I can almost see)
in my burning clothes, the thin green shorts

and grubby yellow T-shirt
holding my cindery, non-existent,
radiant flesh. Incandescent.

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This Is a Photograph of Me

Margaret Atwood

1939 –

It was taken some time ago.

At first it seems to be

a smeared

print: blurred lines and grey flecks

blended with the paper;

then, as you scan

it, you see in the left-hand corner

a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree

(balsam or spruce) emerging

and, to the right, halfway up

what ought to be a gentle

slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,

and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken

the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the center

of the picture, just under the surface.

It is difficult to say where

precisely, or to say

how large or small I am:

the effect of water

on light is a distortion

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

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“Introduction to Poetry”

By Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

To My Favorite 17-Year-Old High School Girl

Do you realize that if you had started
building the Parthenon on the day you were born,
you would be all done in only one more year?
Of course, you couldn't have done it alone,
so never mind, you're fine just as you are.
You're loved for just being yourself.

But did you know that at your age Judy Garland
was pulling down \$150,000 a picture,
Joan of Arc was leading the French army to victory,
and Blaise Pascal had cleaned up his room?
No wait, I mean he had invented the calculator.

Of course, there will be time for all that later in your life,
after you come out of your room
and begin to blossom, or at least pick up all your socks.

For some reason, I keep remembering that Lady Jane Grey
was Queen of England when she was only fifteen,
but then she was beheaded, so never mind her as a role model.

A few centuries later, when he was your age,
Franz Schubert was doing the dishes for his family
but that did not keep him from composing two symphonies,
four operas, and two complete Masses as a youngster.

But of course that was in Austria at the height
of romantic lyricism, not here in the suburbs of Cleveland.

Frankly, who cares if Annie Oakley was a crack shot at 15
or if Maria Callas debuted as Tosca at 17?

We think you are special just being you,
playing with your food and staring into space.
By the way, I lied about Schubert doing the dishes,
but that doesn't mean he never helped out around the house.

—Billy Collins

From *Aimless Love*, Random House, 2013.