

Dear Attendees of the March 13 lecture:

The following poems and sets of questions will be referred to during our Zoom meeting on March 13. The questions are **not** comprehension/analysis questions to be applied to their corresponding poem. Rather, they are designed to be information-gathering prompts for generating new poems *in the style of* the corresponding poem.

There is nothing that you need to do prior to our meeting other than, perhaps, read these poems and enjoy them. You can use the questions afterwards (i.e. after our lecture) as part of your poetry-making “toolbox”.

I look forward to our meeting. Be well!

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Oliver', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Alexandra Oliver

Filling Station¹*Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)*

Oh, but it is dirty!
 —this little filling station,
 oil-soaked, oil-permeated
 to a disturbing, over-all
 black translucency.
 Be careful with that match!

Father wears a dirty,
 oil-soaked monkey suit
 that cuts him under the arms,
 and several quick and saucy
 and greasy sons assist him
 (it's a family filling station),
 all quite thoroughly dirty.

Do they live in the station?
 It has a cement porch
 behind the pumps, and on it
 a set of crushed and grease-
 impregnated wickerwork;
 on the wicker sofa
 a dirty dog, quite comfy.

Some comic books provide
 the only note of color—
 of certain color. They lie
 upon a big dim doily
 draping a taboret
 (part of the set), beside
 a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
 Why the taboret?
 Why, oh why, the doily?
 (Embroidered in daisy stitch

¹ Bishop, Elizabeth. "Filling Station". *The Complete Poems*. Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1983. 127-128.

with marguerites, I think,
and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
Somebody waters the plant,
or oils it, maybe. Somebody
arranges the rows of cans
so that they softly say:
esso—so—so—so
to high-strung automobiles.
Somebody loves us all.

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "FILLING STATION"
AS INSPIRATION
(Every Place is an Intersection)

Questions to think about:

1. How does this place feel, spatially?
2. How long has this place been here?
3. Who runs this place?
4. Who works at this place?
5. What sort of people come here?
6. How might people feel coming here?
7. What unexpected thing might happen here?
8. How does this place give joy or offer comfort?

The Bean Eaters²

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

And remembering...
Remembering, with thinkings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that
 is full of beads and receipts and dolls and cloths
 tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

² Brooks, Gwendolyn. "The Bean Eaters". *Selected Poems*. Harper and Row, 1963. 72.

GWENDOLYN BROOKS'S "THE BEAN EATERS"
AS INSPIRATION
(The Uncontainable Everyperson/Everyday)

Questions to think about:

1. Who are these people? Describe them
2. What do they like to do every day? What gives them comfort?
3. What constraints/prejudices/small heartbreaks do they face?
4. What has been their biggest hope? Their biggest disappointment?
5. Who do they love the most and why? Does this person/creature love them the same way?
6. What are their bad habits?
7. How does their living space reflect who they are—what they were in the past and what they have become?
8. Do they remind you of anyone that you've known or a part of yourself?

Giving Thanks³

Tony Harrison (1937—)

Last night on 77th I waited
to watch the Macy mammoths get inflated
and listen to the blear-eyed children cheer
as Kermit's leg or Snoopy's limp left ear
came out of their collapse, as gas was blown
through each sagged limb, now magically regrown.

Each mammoth stirs beneath its weighted net
straining for the sky it can't have yet,
impatient to be loosed out of the dark
over the browning trees of Central Park.

From yesterday I still can feel you blow
your love all through me like some helium
that restores my true proportions, head to toe,
and lifts my body skywards. When I come
I'm out of the sandbagged nets and soar away
into release and *my* Thanksgiving Day.

³Harrison, Tony, "Giving Thanks". *Selected Poems*. King Penguin, 1986. 189.

TONY HARRISON'S "GIVING THANKS"
AS INSPIRATION
(Meeting as Metaphors)

Questions to think about:

1. When does this event take place? What is the weather like?
2. Who are the "typical" sorts of people who are gathering at this event?
3. How does this gathering/event affect the landscape/town where it is held? How would it change if it were not held there?
4. What are they longing to see or do and why? What are they dreading?
5. Imagine an outsider, an atypical attendee at this gathering/event. Describe them. Why are they there?
6. What are the sounds/smells of this event/gathering?
7. Does this event/gathering "plug into" anything from your past? Why and how?
8. What completely disconnected private life event could be linked metaphorically to this public gathering/event?

The Traveling Onion⁴

Naomi Shihab Nye (1952—)

“It is believed that the onion originally came from India. In Egypt it was an object of worship
—why I haven’t been able to find out. From Egypt the onion entered Greece and on to Italy,
thence into all of Europe.” —*Better Living Cookbook*.

When I think how far the onion has traveled
Just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise
all small forgotten miracles,
crackly paper peeling on the drainboard,
pearly layers in smooth agreement,
the way the knife enters onion
and onion falls apart on the chopping block,
a history revealed.
And I would never scold the onion
for causing tears.
It is right that tears fall
for something small and forgotten.
How at meal, we sit to eat,
commenting on texture of meat or herbal aroma
but never on the translucence of onion,
now limp, now divided,
or its traditionally honourable career:
For the sake of others,
disappear.

⁴ Shahab Nye, Naomi. “The Traveling Onion”. poets.org. The Academy of American Poets. <https://poets.org/poem/traveling-onion>

NAOMI SHIHAB NYE'S "THE TRAVELLING ONION"
AS INSPIRATION
(What's the Backstory?)

Questions to think about:

1. Describe this object. What is its function in your life?
2. When did you first encounter this object?
3. How might this object inspire love/disgust/indifference?
4. Are there any stories/cultural traditions/superstitions around this object?
5. Where has this object travelled from? What the journey short or long? If it was manufactured, who made it? Think about that person.
6. If you could talk to this object, what would you tell it? What would you ask it?
7. How has this object connected people where you live or work? How do others react to it?
8. How is this object a miracle? How is it a curse?

Washing the Windows⁵*Julia Alvarez (1950—)*

I helped with the windows,
hosing them down,
while she plunged her sponge
into a soapy bucket
clouding them up.

She stretched for the top panes,
and squatted on the ladder
level with my shoulder
for the low ones
I might have done.

I handed her the towels,
took them crumpled back
and grew bored
emptying her bucket,
giving her what she needed

up there on a ladder
too dangerous for a child.
Only when I aimed the hose up
making the glass drum and the suds scatter
did I get the feel of the job.

On the tip of her sneakers,
she made the high glasses
glow like mirrors
and lowered the sky back
into each window.

⁵ Alvarez, Julia. "Washing the Windows". *Homecoming*. Plume/Penguin, 1996. 17.

JULIA ALVAREZ'S "WASHING THE WINDOWS"
AS INSPIRATION
(Domestic Ritual as The Great Magnifier)

Questions to think about:

1. What are the steps in this domestic ritual?
2. Who did this when you were a child? What do you remember about the process?
3. Would you help? How did helping make you feel? What contributions did you make?
4. What are the sounds that resonate from the domestic task? What are the smells?
5. What rituals do you have around this task? Do you wear special clothing or play a certain piece of music?
6. Is this process dangerous? How?
7. What is the greatest pleasure associated with this domestic act? What is the greatest nuisance?
8. How does the experience of this domestic process extend outward to the greater world or inward to the soul?