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Going Wrong

POETRY BY

Marilyn L. Taylor



PARALLEL PRESS

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

Going Wrong

Poetry by
Marilyn L. Taylor



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With thanks to the editors of the publications in which the following poems, sometimes in slightly different versions, first appeared: *Aralia Press*: “The Seven Very Liberal Arts”; *Indiana Review*: “Drive All Night” and “The Lovers at Eighty”; *Measure*: “November in Verona, Wisconsin”; *Mezzo Cammin*: “A Highly Caloric Lament”; *Passager*: “The Aging Huntress Speaks to her Reflection” and “I Miss You and I’m Drunk”; *Poetry*: “To a Young Diver”; *Smartish Pace*: “In Other News” and “To the Mother of a Dead Marine”; the anthology *Rhymes for Adults* (Virginia Reals Press, 2006): “Home Again, Home Again”; *Wisconsin Poets Calendar, 2005*: “Crickets: A Late Chorale”; *Wisconsin Poets Calendar, 2006*: “Valentine for a Bashful Boy”; *Zinkzine: A Journal of Fine Writing*: “Studying the Menu,” “A Capella,” and “Hunger.”

Additionally, the following poems received literary awards from the journals in which they were originally published: “In Other News,” “The Aging Huntress Speaks to Her Reflection,” and “I Miss You and I’m Drunk.”

FIRST EDITION

For Kathrine, Moira, Tatyana, and Amy

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The Aging Huntress Speaks to Her Reflection

Dear old moon of a face,
you've been looking back at me
for decades now

always giving me your best tilt
and a little quiver of lies—
but don't I love you for it?

Don't I fix my gaze on all
your nubbins and craters,
know your geography by heart?

Maybe I'll take you to town tonight,
tricked out in gilt and camouflage—
see how it goes with the men.

Not the young ones, those cheerful bucks
who look at you with all their teeth
thinking: *Teapot. Hairpin. Marianne Moore.*

It's their fathers, beery and balding,
and the loners in their silver ponytails,
heartbreakingly wistful—

they're the ones I want
to cool my heels with, feel
the warm breath of on my neck

while we knock a few back,
shoot the breeze, and bathe together
in your fading borrowed light.

The Seven Very Liberal Arts: A Crown of Sonnets

According to Plato and Aristotle, the liberal arts are the subjects suitable for the development of intellectual and moral excellence, as distinguished from those merely useful and practical.

—Encarta

1. Logic

A moment's peace from you, old Earth—enough's enough! Your gorgeousness is still in season, still clobbering philosophy and reason in one delicious blow. Show me your stuff, and dump “The Liberal Arts,” that old flim-flammy that goes like this (my drop-dead parlor-trick):
Logic, Grammar, Music, Rhetoric,
Geology, Arithmetic, Astronomy.

They're very easy to recite, but hard as hell to live with. Ever try to dance with Logic, to unzip its crotchety pants, get sexy deconstructing Kierkegaard? Unpromising. Like bathing with a cat. And no one needs to write a book on that.

2. Grammar

My dear Professor, write a book on me—
devote a chapter to my graceful lines,
and how my every syllable defines
the dips and rises of my prosody.
Come scan me carefully—and when you're through
deal with my feet, iambic and trochaic,
pronounce them perfect (if a touch archaic);
then taste the syllables in my haiku.

Scribble suggestions slowly down my spine
with your intense, exploratory care,
and punctuate, with sharp intakes of air
the way my staves and strophes intertwine.
And then, Professor, sign me fore and aft,
as if I were a promising first draft.

3. Music

If I can promise you a frosty draft
of Bud Lite when we get there, can we go
to Nashville? Kansas City? Branson Mo?
I'm craving country music—that whole raft
of anthems from the boys who do it best,
star-twangled-banners from the girls who strayed
and lied and loved, and finally got laid
by some hot cowpoke in a leather vest.

Been thinking, off and on, of Toby Keith,
the way his fingers pluck that blue guitar;
I dream up porno movies (he's the star)
on how those fingers feel from underneath—
but never mind; it's high time we departed.
Get in the car. Shut up. Don't get me started.

4. Rhetoric

Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up. Okay?
You're not my lucky star, you are a damn
black hole. I do not love you, Sam-I-am.
Get lost. Scram. Beat it. Go away.
Clear out your retrosexual groceries—
that loaf of bread, the jug of wine—right now;
and as for your adoring little *thou* ,
just watch her kick you in the fantasies.

I get the sense you're painfully aware
that you're a sorry-ass. The Big Dumpee.
How sad. Let me extend my sympathy
by offering you a simple little prayer:
*May your next cocktail be a Molotov,
and everything that you hold dear fall off.*

5. Geology

Hold it!—hold everything—I'm falling off the edge (there goes my equilibrium—so long!) because of you and your sublime topography. You're dangerous enough to cause a tremor, a gigantic lurch, a nine on my internal Richter scale. You pulse with something seismically male and I'm no safer on my little perch than in a shack along the San Andreas. How can I ever rise above the rubble of what you've done to me—stay out of trouble when aftershocks will certainly betray us?

A tougher question than I bargained for; remember, I am molten at the core.

6. Arithmetic

Mmm-mm, it melts the very core of me
to listen to the cheerful clink and jingle
in your deep pockets. I begin to tingle
when you declare that I'm your chickadee
and you're my guaranteed annuity,
my piggy bank, my Google IPO;
and should you strike out in a year or so,
I could become your 501(c)3.

A little bit of Warren Buffett
is all it took—a little real estate,
a tiny merger— to emancipate
those lovely megabucks. I do agree
the time has clearly come for you to lay
your Freddie Mac against my Fannie Mae.

7. Astronomy

Frédéric Chopin, Fannie Mendelssohn,
Claude Debussy— when you woke up at night
(synapses snapping wildly) did you write
your nocturnes then? And was the woozy moon
spreading its silver fingers over yours,
convincing you to give in to your will,
your High Romantic fantasies, until
the swollen stars were winking like voyeurs?

How intimate were you with the coiled wires
underneath the piano's lid— as note
by note you wove a lovely antidote
for our enormous, orbiting desires?
Did you suspect how much it would be worth
to bring one moment's peace to this old earth?

Pyrotechnics at Amherst

*If I feel, physically, as if the top of my head were taken off,
I know that is poetry.*

—Emily Dickinson

But which ones were they—the poems that did
this awesome deed? Whose gunpowder lines
ignited right in front of her, firing flame-red
peonies, palms, rockets, straight into her brain?

Herbert's transcendental thunder?
Or Emerson, whose counterpoints of doom
and doubt, science and salvation, stunned her—
dazzled her with their afterbloom?

Did she survive the heart-stopping artillery
of Keats, of Barrett Browning—the kind that flies
and detonates before it falls? Or did she,
pale target, take it right between the eyes?

How long till she came back to life again,
trembling and reaching for her pen?

To the Mother of a Dead Marine

Your boy once touched me, yes. I knew you knew
when your wet, reddened gaze drilled into me,
groped through my clothes for signs, some residue
of him—some lusciousness of mine that he
had craved, that might have driven his desire
for things perilous, poisonous, out-of-bounds.
Could I have been the beast he rode to war?
The battle mounted in his sleep, the rounds
of ammunition draped like unblown blossoms
round his neck? Could I have somehow flung
myself against the wall of his obsessions,
leaving spells and curses on his tongue?
Your fingers tighten, ready to engage
the delicate hair-trigger of your rage.

Latter-day Letter to ESVM

Edna St. Vincent Millay enjoyed the status of a best-selling poet in the 1920s, when her slim volumes could be found in every genteel home in the nation.

—Ernest Hilbert

Listen, Vincent. If I'd known you, if
I'd been your friend, here's what I would have said
to you: get *up*. Kick that stranger out of bed,
and try to keep your clothes on long enough
to find a pen. Then write a line of verse
that wraps the adolescent century
in a feather boa—not the corsetry
of lofty lexicology—or (worse)
the virginal vernacular of swoon.
Dazzle us. Tell us how it must have been
to flicker through the past as libertine,
rippling with sequins, sonnets, saxophones.
Ah, the streets you could have danced us through—
Gifted practitioner, why didn't you?

Valentine for a Bashful Boy

Lovely man, my shaggy puppy,
Why the frown? The visage droopy?
Does the lack of making whoopee
Make you feel all misanthropy?

Don't be downcast, don't be weepy—
Climb to my veranda, Dopey,
where the light, kaleidoscopey,
Spills through these French doors, mon poupée!

Come to me, mine erstwhile hippie—
Fill my fluted glass with happy
Bubbles, add a wet and sloppy
Kiss or two—and make it snappy!

Studying the Menu

Speaking of all those things you'll never eat,
my love—could one of them, in fact, be crow?
Of course it could. But you already know
how poisonous it tastes (if bittersweet).
These days you're craving quite another treat:
the one who will replace me. But that sloe-
eyed, slack-jawed creature's surely going to show
you all the nuance of a bitch in heat.

I hope she has the brains of a golden retriever,
the glamour of an aging manatee,
the refinement of a Packers wide receiver
and finds her favorite books at Dollar Tree.
—And darling, may she be a born deceiver,
and do to you what you have done to me.

At the Cocktail Party: A Monorhyme

I can't ignore, I can't explain
the way my retrogressive brain
can almost always ascertain
with little effort, zero strain,
the men with whom I'd stand to gain
what every grown-up would maintain
was one of those adult, humane
relationships that entertain
no possibility of pain,
no *Here I Go Again* refrain—
and wouldn't nurture my insane
desire to go against the grain,
seeking out the perfect vein
in which to shoot some Novocain.

And yet I'm always heading for
those characters I should ignore—
the ones with habits I deplore:
their tendencies to hog the floor
intoning words like "*heretofore*"
and dumping too much private lore
on those they've never met before,
like they've had kinky sex galore
but found it a terrific bore—
then whispering just how much more
a night with *me* might have in store.
Nevermore. Ah, nevermore.
Just watch me march: one two three four
bass-ackwards out the kitchen door.

A Highly Caloric Lament

A pox upon you, Charlie's Chili Dogs,
Starbucks, Chipotle, Coldstone Creamery,
you harpies of the dreaded calorie—
quit hitting on me till my judgment fogs,
and every vein and capillary clogs
with drippings from your latest recipe!
Arugula? Not for the likes of me,
and neither are those dreadful diet blogs.
Been there, done that— gave all my sweets away,
ate naked salad, kept the flab at bay.
But nowadays my magnitude increases.
I'm getting tubby. Fatter by the day.
Just look at me: mine aft has gang agley,
my life's in shreds; my mind's in Reese's Pieces!

Crickets: A Late Chorale

As if Boulez had raised his arms
and readied his baton,
the crickets poise themselves to play
their autumn song.

Soprano saxophones invade
the saturated air
with rounds of semi-quavers, shrill
against the ear.

Incessant, their cacophony
becomes the leitmotif—
they know their time to reproduce
is growing brief.

And we who listen will do one
of several likely things:
deplore the deviousness of time,
or fold our wings,

or open them impulsively,
chirping with all our mights
for one more spell—or maybe two—
of red-hot nights.

Extravaganza at Dave's

The house in this poem is not my house,
the red oaks arching over it not my trees—
but every time I come here, the birds
remember me. They catch me spying on them
through the wide window and begin
to dance for joy— twirler, skyrocketer,
cartwheeler, prima ballerina, star performer
in the Cirque du Soleil of July.

Shirttail cousins, that's what they are—
related but distant, separable, each troupe
rehearsing its own routines and attitudes.
I watch them dive, then flutterup and catapult
for a sunflower seed—maintaining the careful
pecking order, the given choreography.
Through the glass, I hear the massed chorale
of the entire ensemble: *cardinal, jay,*
woodpecker, jay, robin, junco, bunting,
jay, jay, jay.

Home Again, Home Again

The children are back, the children are back—
They've come to take refuge, exhale and unpack;
The marriage has faltered, the job has gone bad,
Come open the door for them, Mother and Dad.

The city apartment is leaky and cold,
The landlord lascivious, greedy and old—
The mattress is lumpy, the oven's encrusted,
The freezer, the fan, and the toilet have rusted.

The company caved, the boss went broke,
The job and the love-affair, all up in smoke.
The anguish of loneliness comes as a shock—
O heart in the doldrums, O heart in hock.

And so they return with their piles of possessions,
Their terrified cats and their mournful expressions
Reclaiming the bedrooms they had in their teens,
Clean towels, warm comforter, glass figurines.

Downstairs in the kitchen the father and mother
Don't say a word, but they look at each other
As down from the hill comes Jill, comes Jack.
The children are back. The children are back.

To a 17-Year-Old: A Commencement Address

I'd like to tell him something he should know
on this momentous day— his graduation.
I don't think he's going to like it, though.

He'll claim he heard that sermon long ago,
why can't I rid myself of my fixation,
quit mouthing things I think he ought to know?

He's certain that I'll tell him *Take it slow.*
Do all your messing up in moderation.
He's right. And he won't like it much. Although

he'll like it better than the way I'll go
mano a mano, some smooth variation
on all the things he doesn't know I know—

like where he hides his stash from Mexico
and other shortcuts to intoxication
beneath the basement stairs. He'll deny it, though.

Still, I'll avoid that burning down below,
exclude all references to fornication,
even small precautions. (Like he doesn't know?)

And that's my make-believe scenario,
my grand conclusion to his education:
I'll tell him everything he needs to know.
He'll barely listen. That won't stop me, though.

A Capella

Singing of home, you lift his self-esteem
by pressing your warm cheek against his thigh,
eliciting an undersong from him,
his moist and muted baritone reply;
two variations on the ancient theme
of tongue and touch—followed closely by
rising glissandos, sweet in the extreme,
where semiquavers rise, explode, and die.

These are the oratorios of sex:
the incandescent music of the spheres
pulsating with the power to perplex;
your bodies arch and bend toward what they hear—
the melody, persistent and complex,
that never dwindles, never disappears.

I Miss You and I'm Drunk

Look at the way the moon just sits there
with its brights on, aiming
that yellowish beam across the water
at the lovers and the skinnydippers

and how the summer sawgrass
grabs me by the ankles, making me
stumble, making me think about
the flaming ache of falling down on top of you

and how you would cup my face
between your hands and stare at me
crosseyed—God knows what you saw there
but it was always enough

to start us banging together like
a couple of drunk drivers—woozy,
reckless through the barricades, catching
fire, turning over and over

till we finally hit the ground
smoking, practically unconscious
with the moon all over us.
And that is why I plan

to spend the night right here
on this besotted beach—to carve
another tire-track in the sand, deep
and warped with complications.

Hunger

Hush. Hush. The howl of lobos, the wild dogs' ululations will grow fainter soon, and you, my friend, exhausted to the bone, will stumble backward through a Cuervo fog euphoric, if unsteady on your legs. Your latest round of catch-me-if-you-can is history; another brown-eyed man has left your bed, lowering his white flag.

He was a marvel, this one, wasn't he? Almost had you breaking down the wall between you marked *adultery, adultery*—the way you felt your melting body fall into his open hands. The man was all you knew. *Ah, God*, you said. *Finally*.

In Other News

They called the circumstances *drug-related* when they found her—face-up, open-eyed, bloody, but fully clothed. Witnesses said the murdered girl had not been violated—and you could call that lucky. Her first stroke of luck since the convulsive day she fled from the cold kitchen where her mother spread her fury every morning, black and thick for breakfast, making the corrupted air unfit to breathe. Forcing her out the door. *I'll kill the little bitch* her mother swore *when she comes crawling back from god-knows-where*—a comment the police chose to ignore, because it hardly mattered anymore.

The Lovers at Eighty

Fluted light from the window finds her
sleepless in the double bed, her eyes

measuring the chevron angle his knees make
under the coverlet. She is trying to recall

the last time they made love. It must have been
in shadows like these, the morning his hands

took their final tour along her shoulders and down
over the pearls of her vertebrae

to the cool dunes of her hips, his fingers
executing solemn little figures

of farewell. Strange—it's not so much
the long engagement as the disengagement

of their bodies that fills the hollow
curve of memory behind her eyes—

how the moist, lovestrung delicacy
with which they let each other go

had made a sound like taffeta
while decades flowed across them like a veil.

November in Verona, Wisconsin

A brutal afternoon. Sleet's been clattering
against the windows, hammering the lawn
to stubble, and the girl inside has drawn
a little closer to the fire, scattering
brochures in random drifts across the floor.

She longs for Europe, yearns for its sublime
decay: cathedrals lined with crumbling saints
and martyrs, darkening portraiture, the faint
remains of frescoes bleeding through the grime—
graffiti out of fourteen eighty-four,

And ah, the great stone castles— stormed
by those whose bloody lives and stunning deaths
were woven, later, into song and myth,
fabliaux that ultimately formed
an endless fountainhead of metaphor.

Outside, the frigid winds still agitate,
attempting in their unrelenting way
to bring a bit of drama to her day—
as if these latitudes could compensate
for all she lacks, and all she's longing for.

Drive All Night

Simply set your cruising speed at sixty-eight,
stick to the Interstate, and you'll arrive
like morning's minion, pal—your hair
wind-flattened on one side, pulse walloping
at optimum efficiency, tight schedule intact.
Just repeat after me: *avoid small towns.*

That's right, eschew those towns,
friend, those glomerations of eight
or nine hundred rubes named Dwayne, intact
in their dullness. Their collective aim: to arrive
at the local wienie-works on time—hair
greased, molars brushed, haunches walloping.

It's true, of course, that your own walloping
windshield wipers could turn some of these towns
(for all their Wal-Marts and parking meters and Hair
Chalets) into vapor-lit versions of eight-
centh-century streetscapes. Especially if you arrive
under canopies of ancient elms, all intact.

And if a row of bungalows, equally intact,
happens to feature one lace curtain walloping
crazily in the night breeze, you might arrive
at certain conclusions about small towns.
You might even come within a hair
of staying for supper. Even if you just ate.

Maybe you find a chrome diner, circa 1958, with pictures of Charlie Chaplin tacked to the walls. A waitress with long copper hair grins and takes your order: a walloping plate of beans and ham, followed by the town's finest apple pie. Then the locals start to arrive:

Where's your girl, Dwayne? You got a rival, buddy? You just been eight-balled? Well, here's what the town's been saying—she ain't what you call intact, boy. Broad needs a good walloping to keep her zipped up and out of your hair.

—Fade out. No diner, no copper hair, no small towns. Only those walloping tires and the hum of your V-8. Drive all night, friend. Arrive intact.

To a Young Diver

For R.R.T

So long, silversides.
The lips of the sea
close over you.

I watch you shimmer
and vanish into
the inverted garden

where minnows flock
like sparrows
and tiny pods of air

sequin the powdered
shoulders of
the reef.

Deeper: obsidian walls
flicker with mystery—
fish are flame, coral sways

to the throb of
the young planet
in its skin.

Down there
you are only a fold
in the water, a mote

in time—yesterday spreads
beneath you, silent
as bedrock

while the future presses
upward: a helix rising
through pre-Cambrian blue

brightening
to gem turquoise
as you break the surface

streaming gold, festooned
with your tangled cargo,
your frieze of stars.



Marilyn L. Taylor's poems have appeared in *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, *Measure*, and many other journals and anthologies. Her work has taken first place in competitions sponsored by *Dogwood*, *Passager*, *The Ledge*, *GSU Review*, and *The Atlanta Review*. Her second full-length poetry collection titled *Subject to Change* (David Robert Books, 2004) was nominated for the Poets Prize in 2005.

Taylor taught poetry and poetics at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee Department of English and for the university's Honors College for many years. She is a contributing editor for *The Writer* magazine, where her articles on poetic craft appear bi-monthly. She served as Poet Laureate of Milwaukee for 2004–05 and was appointed Poet Laureate of Wisconsin in 2009.

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