

Haleh Mawson
"The Oak Trees Stand"
Week 1

Part of the reason I was drawn to this poem is because it is more cryptic than the others in Ziedonis's *My Motorcycle*. It has no first person narrator, no emphasis on speed and journeys, and in fact looks at the most still and rooted of living things: the oak. It's quiet, but full of longing, giving the oaks the same striving that the motorcyclist, reaching for the moon and stars when they can never be touched or held. These motionless, sturdy beings, the poet says, have a secret desperation. The mystery, of course, is why they would want to hold lights in their branches at all. Aren't they content? Aren't they self-contained? Apparently not. I cannot tell whether the oaks are reaching for purpose, beauty, or community, but that puzzle is part of its appeal. Even when given a privileged look into the soul of another being, it remains a mystery. The oak trees long to be chandeliers. I have no idea why, but it's a lovely image.

"Fifth Elegy"
Week 2

All these poems, being elegies, describe a harsh and lonesome land, but this one stood out as being especially cruel in its beginning and hopeful in its end. In the first two-thirds, it is easy to be caught up in his imagery of a place scoured clear of softness, a coastline whittled down to grit, where even sturdy oaks are broken by the wind. The narrator's kin have fled, an exodus that leads to no promised land. And then, in the midst of the storm, amber rises and reminds the narrator why they remain in this battered place. And of course, reading it over again, I noticed the implication in the first line: the storm will end. Who will endure it? The narrator, prizing the amber that gets swept up. A home is home for a reason, after all, even if it is sometimes - or often - inhospitable. We are tied to these places, and the amber is symbolic of these ties, the beautiful things that only appear when one weathers the harshness. That was what I loved about this poem.

The Man Who Spoke Snakish, Chapter 22
Week 3

I chose this passage, consisting of the grandfather's rant about building bone wings and killing everyone, because I thought it was funny. Every forest dweller in this book is coping in their own way with the end of their world, but Leemet's grandfather is unique. Where the other characters regard killing either as quotidian (like Leemet and Ints with the monk) or as a religious necessity (like Ulgas and Tambet), the grandfather is gleeful at the thought of mass murder. He's a one man war. Leemet later says that his grandfather is an emblem of making do with what you have, since he lost his legs and decided to replace them with wings. It could also be read as metaphorically losing touch with reality and replacing it with extravagant dreams, although in this book it's probably perfectly possible for a 90-something-year-old man to fly around on bone wings, swooping down to bite people with his venomous fangs. It's certainly a powerful image of the last rages of a dying culture, if nothing else.

Kalevipoeg
The 6th Tale
Week 4

In this passage, Kalevipoeg is essentially whining about his life. It's something I haven't encountered really in other heroic epics, and I was therefore surprised by it. Kalevipoeg brags about his deeds like any other great hero, but I don't think Beowulf or Siegfried or Roland would be quick to give a woe-is-me speech. Granted, his life is pretty dismal in some ways. An orphan, his siblings far away and probably sleeping on real beds, doomed to wander alone in the woods. Still, you expect some optimism from your heroes, especially if their current complaint is that they've been stumbling around the woods for three days. That said, it is another way to humanize him. He is a deeply flawed hero, and one of those flaws is that he sometimes pities himself and gives way to despair. He makes hasty decisions, goes off ill-prepared, suffers for it, but recovers with the new dawn and sets off again. That's all you can do, really, and the fact that he has moments of doubt and misery make his ability to get up and move on more remarkable.

"There Beyond the Dunojelis River"
Week 5

This is a poem about war, and yet full of quiet, pensive imagery. It captivated me because of its perspective. It is told, insofar as I can tell, from the perspective of the shot soldier, lying in the snow and apparently dying, remembering girls he saw raking hay and singing. There's so much left out of the poem, so many stories untold. What sad songs were the girls singing, and was it their lyrics which saddened him, or the thought that he might not hear such songs again? Who shot him, and for what cause? What letter does the soldier write, what message does he feel compelled to share in his final moments? One is left, after reading the poem, with only a few simple images to answer a million questions. At the same time, I can see how a nation could be proud of a poem like this. It's patriotic, but not in the violent, blustering way that some of the other poems we read this week. Instead, it feels more like the reasons one might fight for a country or cause, the precious images and people that make a place a home worth defending.

First Speech by Žemaitė
Week 6

This is a snippet from the middle of her speech, but one that stood out to me because she switches from third to second person. It's usual for speeches to be in the second person, since they're addressed to an audience, but Žemaitė takes a different tack. When reading her story of the archetypal girl's life, she went into such depth about the motivations and emotions of the families that I forgot that it was only an example, and a general one at that. The father and groom are given short shrift, I admit, compared to her other stories, but they still don't come across as villains. The mother is treated compassionately, as is the girl, of course. The customs that lead to such marriages are the subject of Žemaitė's ire, the people who follow those customs granted her empathy. So it is something of a shock to come to these paragraphs and be told that it is *me* she is talking about, or rather, her female audience. It brings it home in a way that I think would not have been possible if she had used second person from the beginning, or if she had continued the girl's story in more detached third person.

"The Star-Bright Hour"

Week 7

While we didn't end up talking about Alver's poetry in class, I really liked her stuff. I picked this poem, of all of them, because it was the least personal and most enigmatic. Unlike the others, which are apparently about her life (or at least, someone's life), this one is about death, or life in retrospect. At first read, it felt grim and almost spiteful: "Go ask," telling the aimless to see "consumerism's reward," all those pointed questions. I got the sense that she was speaking to someone quiet, pliant, who lived by social rules and meek obedience without striving towards a transcendental goal or greater understanding, someone who she thought was wasting their life. On further read-throughs, though, I started to wonder if those questions were genuine. She seemed to be truly wondering why one cannot live again, why people are cruel, and why the spirit survives through the hardest of times. Perhaps she is trying to work some of these out herself, reckon up some of the meaning from existence before she, too, ends up among the dead. And then there is the mystery of the last two stanzas, with the midnight marsh and the boatman who apparently dies in the dark without a lamp, either a suicide or unlucky. "Never ask yesterday" sounds like she is saying that you cannot ask the dead to come back, but then, these dead occupy a different category from the dead in the stanza before. I can't figure it out, which is something I like in a poem.

"Adieu, white bird, adieu"

Week 8

I liked the simplicity of this poem. It was short, quiet, and clear, a small despairing lament that ends with a glimpse of something more. The first stanza recognizes the darkness of humanity, saying that "we are sowing death" throughout nature and ourselves. I read this as a description of war, the ultimate wrecker of lives and countrysides, but it also suggests the ecological destruction humans have wreaked through pollution, development, and resource extraction, with the white bird read either as a dove of peace disappearing before the battle or as a species going extinct. Either way, the narrator is focused on the earthly evils we have brought on ourselves. Then, in the second stanza, the narrator looks up past the dying forests and drying streams to something beyond them, a glimmering star that is forever unchanged. There is something that endures past woe, death, destruction, and decay. It's a flicker of hope, a realization that there exists something incorruptible, and with it we feel that perhaps there is some hope for humanity after all.

"Wolf"

Week 9

I divided this poem into roughly two halves. The first half addresses the apparent ingratitude of the wolf, ignoring food or the master's sweet words, so set on returning to the forest that it dismisses all the kindness that its owner has shown it. There's a hint of the lie behind those sweet words when she says a wolf will not "thank you for sparing its life," but it is easy to read past the implied threat of death and focus instead on the warm bed and free (if meager) food. The question - "Or maybe it can't hear?" - is the point at which we understand the motivation of the wolf, a wild beast intent on its own freedom and unable to look past the master's cruelty and oppression as a weak, docile dog would. The wolf won't be

content in a cozy prison. It will equally resist violence and the whip. If you cannot set a wolf free, your only option is to "kill it," a phrase that sounds all the more harsh because Belševica sets it off on a new line, without giving equal weight to the language of setting the wolf loose. It's almost as if that is not an option, possibly because the master is afraid of the wolf. If we take the wolf to be the nations conquered by the USSR and strangled under Stalinism and its successors, that idea contains both hope and terror. It is a death struggle, and the Soviet state has the upper hand, but by implying that the master fears the wolf Belševica gives us an idea of how freedom can win out. The wolf is brave, intent on its goal.

"Dawn"

Tõnis Mägi

Week 10

I originally chose this poem because of the line "the ice has cracked." Despite the obvious difference between the two, it reminded me of the line from Shostakovich's *Babi Yar*, when two lovers are hiding. One worries that the SS are coming, breaking down the door, while the other insists it is only the sound of ice breaking with the spring thaw. That's pretty much the only similarity between the two, but Shostakovich means that I associate the sound of ice cracking with drastic, all-encompassing change in a person's life. It could be a blessing, a thaw. It could also mean instability or imminent danger. I imagine the slow end of the USSR was like that, too, a time of mixed fear and hope that could easily paralyze a person just as much as the post-Stalin state oppression did, preventing them from seizing the moment that had been given them. And it took time, too, for the Soviet states to pull apart, and for Baltic people to reclaim their independence. It's easy to imagine why Mägi, having heard the first cracks of the thaw in late winter, now insists that it is a good thing, that now is the time to band together and begin striving for freedom and sovereignty. It's "the very first ray," the hint of what's to come, but it won't happen unless everyone joins in the struggle. He needs to persuade them of their power, putting emphasis on a few vital words to carry his point. I think the music builds on that as much as the lyrics do, with the ratatat of drums and his own curt, confident singing voice, sounding powerful without ever verging into martial. It's good music for a nonviolent movement, and good music for a nation to coalesce around, since it focuses only on encouraging strength and unity without ever making reference to oppressors or an enemy. It's also not a bad song.

"Endless Milky Way"

Week 11

The poem is short, but the song is long. Every note is drawn out, but pure and high, giving me an impression of the stars described, while the trumpet (or whatever it is - I'm very bad with instruments) sounds like the road complementing the Milky Way above. It's quite beautiful. As for the poem itself, I liked the way it made usually negative images sound lovely and good. Dark nights are supposed to be frightening, but in this poem they seem simply like the best way to see the stars. Mists can be gothic or foreboding, but here they are gentle. And the eternal road, which in other contexts could be reminiscent of Cain or other cursed wanderers, here seems like infinite potential. It has a destination, which seems achievable even if it is on the far terminus of an endless road, and from the way it is described the narrator already seems to have arrived, in spirit if not in body. It does make me wonder if the poem's narrator ever

reaches where they're going. Is it even possible to arrive there, in a paradise that is also home? I hope so, and, in defense of my optimism, I think the poem encourages us to hope.