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Book Notes #184

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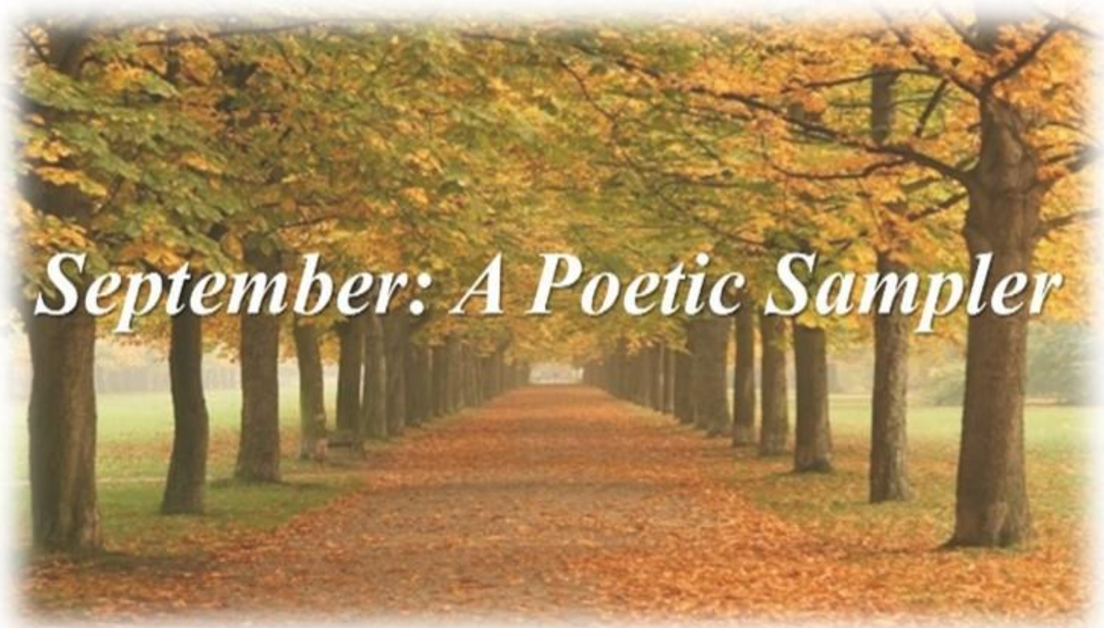
September: A Poetic Sampler



At the moment, I need to take a break from politics while I process the implications for America and try to understand where we've arrived in our shared political history when a vice-presidential candidate of a major party admits he lies and makes up stories for effect. It is no stretch to say that is a first – not the first time a vice-presidential or presidential candidate lied, but the first time one owned it as a legitimate strategy. [1]

Since it's September, I decided to pivot and think about autumn, my favorite time of year.

Fair warning, it's a trick question: "What is the first day of autumn?"

And why is September, the ninth month of the year, named after the Latin for the number seven – "septem"?

Regarding the first question, in 2024, the first day of autumn is next Sunday, September 22 – the autumnal equinox. The equinoxes and solstices do not mark a season's first day. No, they mark that season's midpoint (or, some might say, highpoint) from which it then begins its slide into the next season. The actual first day of each season precedes its corollary equinox or solstice by approximately six weeks.

Any season's specific first day is unidentifiable, but such ambiguity explains 70-degree days in late February, and chill, gray days in mid-August. Which also explains why the first of the harvest festivals in the English-speaking world is *Lammas,* or *Loaf Mass*, loaf symbolizing bread and "Mass" a Christian religious service. In the west of England, it is observed on August 1 celebrating the season's first harvest. It is related to the Gaelic harvest festival Lughnasadh. I discussed all of this in a JES presentation "American Holidays: Halloween and Thanksgiving,," which can be found here.

That ambiguity is now only heightened as climate change further muddles the seasons. The high in Erie, Pennsylvania, the day I am writing this, was in the low 80s; and tomorrow, it is forecast to be about 78. So, rather than autumn's midpoint, much less its first day, the autumnal equinox might now symbolize late summer with autumn itself arriving sometime in October or even November.

Calendars are fascinating, for they purport to measure with precision the passing days, weeks, months, seasons, and years, when, in fact, they are relics of our ancestors' best guesses at time's passing. Getting the date right was important, particularly in northern climes, in order to know when to begin planting the spring crops. [2] But, back to the main thread, why is the ninth month of the year named after the Latin word seven – "septem"?

Well, it's all about getting those seasonal forecasts correct. The original Roman calendar had 10 months; the last six were simply the Roman numbers for six, seven, eight (*Oct*ober?), nine, and ten (*Dec*ember?). But by the late first century B.C.E., the calendar had gotten increasingly out of sync with the sun and the moon and no longer accurately predicted the equinoxes and solstices. Julius Caesar ordered a revision. The solution? Add two more months to the calendar, tweak the number of days per month, and add one day every four years to the second month ("Leap Year").

Caesar, taking his imperial prerogative to heart, named one of the two new months after himself: Julius equals July. Later, editors changed the name of the former sixth month ("Sextilis") to August to honor the Emperor Caesar Augustus. And, to borrow an exclamatory phrase from Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *"hey presto,"* our calendar's months have Roman names, and the days of our weeks are named after Norse gods and goddesses (but that came later). Thursday is Thor's day and Wednesday, after some linguistic acrobatics honors Odin, so that Wednesday once upon a time was "(W)oden'stag," "tag" (with a very long *a*) being German for "day."

Whether seventh or ninth, September always resonates with me: it is the month in which I was born; it is, at least in American culture, the de facto cultural New Year's month as America's cultural life tracts the school year, and, in many ways, it is the best month because, while not as hot as July, it is still summery as one season morphs into the next. So, taking a break from politics, to which we shall return in the next several ***Book Notes*** (there is no escaping politics in our time), I asked myself: "What are some fine poems singing of September?"

It turns out there are many, of which the following is only a small sample.

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Probably the most famous is actually a song, "September Song," from the Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson Broadway musical ***Knickerbocker Holiday***, in which the main character notes all the time he wasted in his earlier days and vows to himself having reached September in that "long, long while from May to December" that he will spend the autumn of his days with his beloved. Frank Sinatra made it one of his signature songs, first recording it in the year I was born – 1946.

from September Song

But it's a long, long while
From May to December
And the days grow short

When you reach September

And I have lost one tooth
And I walk a little lame
And I haven't got time
For the waiting game
And the days turn to gold
As they grow few
September, November
And these few golden days
I'd spend with you
These golden days I'd spend with you [3]

A video of Walter Huston singing the original version of "September Song" can be found here, and Frank Sinatra's 1946 version can be found here.

***

Most, but not all, September poems work the theme of life's transition from full bloom to a slowly gathering decay. Sara Teasdale, a fine early 20th century American poet, wrote of the fields after harvest, the sound of the locusts in the evening gleaning the stalks, and transformed it in the poem's last stanza into a metaphor yearning for a departed lover lest she forget him. Perhaps reading too much into it, Teasdale, who won a Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1918, loved the poet Vachel Lindsay but married another when Lindsay felt unable financially to support her. Later in life, she divorced that husband because of his frequent absences and reconnected with Lindsay. Lindsay died by suicide in 1931, and two years later Teasdale followed him, overdosing on sleeping pills.

September Midnight

Lyric night of the lingering Indian Summer,
Shadowy fields that are scentless but full of singing,
Never a bird, but the passionless chant of insects,
Ceaseless, insistent.

The grasshopper's horn, and far-off, high in the maples,
The wheel of a locust leisurely grinding the silence
Under a moon waning and worn, broken,
Tired with summer.

Let me remember you, voices of little insects,
Weeds in the moonlight, fields that are tangled with asters,
Let me remember, soon will the winter be on us,
Snow-hushed and heavy.

Over my soul murmur your mute benediction,
While I gaze, O fields that rest after harvest,
As those who part look long in the eyes they lean to,
Lest they forget them. [4]

***

Teasdale is a fine poet, but she comes very close to telling and not showing. And, as readers of these ***Book Notes*** know, I prefer poets who show and not tell. One of the 20th century's great poets, Seamus Heaney's "Postscript"hints at September and October's intimations of mortality without ever quite telling us that. He trusts that he "paints" well enough that we will "see" what he sees. Having driven with my wife Judy through County Clare in the west of Ireland on a late September afternoon, I have seen "inland among the stones/The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit ..." It's stony ground, to be sure, and walking through it one senses its ancientness to which "You are neither here nor there," past or present or future, just as in autumn it is no longer summer and not yet winter.

Postscript

And some time make the time to drive out west
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,
In September or October, when the wind
And the light are working off each other
So that the ocean on one side is wild
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.
Useless to think you'll park and capture it
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,
A hurry through which known and strange things pass
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open. [5]

***

Another fine Irish poet, Patrick Kavanagh, sings of the pure joy of rural work "on an apple-ripe September morning," which always reminds me of autumn Sundays driving in rural Ohio with my parents to a cider mill on a decrepit farm with unexpectedly wonderful apples just beyond Dover Dam on the road to New Philadelphia.

from <u>On An Apple-ripe September Morning</u>

On an apple-ripe September morning
Through the mist-chill fields I went
With a pitch-fork on my shoulder
Less for use than for devilment… [6]

***

In "After Apple-Picking," Robert Frost turns that seasonal ritual into a meditation on the act of self-reflection and mortality. Life is a series of choices, one leading to the next; in the end, you are what you are because of the choices you've made. In his poem, Frost makes the simple act of apple-picking a metaphor for life's choices, in particular ruing missed opportunities.

from <u>After Apple-Picking</u>

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now… [7]

Although it's not about September, Frost's most famous poem about autumn is "October," in which he perfectly captures the season's tone.

<u>October</u>

O hushed October morning mild,
Thy leaves have ripened to the fall;
Tomorrow's wind, if it be wild,

Should waste them all.
The crows above the forest call;
Tomorrow they may form and go.
O hushed October morning mild,
Begin the hours of this day slow.
Make the day seem to us less brief.
Hearts not averse to being beguiled,
Beguile us in the way you know.
Release one leaf at break of day;
At noon release another leaf;
One from our trees, one far away.
Retard the sun with gentle mist;
Enchant the land with amethyst.
Slow, slow!
For the grapes' sake, if they were all,
Whose leaves already are burnt with frost,
Whose clustered fruit must else be lost—
For the grapes' sake along the wall. [8]

***

Working the same vein of joy, Kavanagh explores and the intimations of mortality Heaney hints at but from a distinctly urban point of view, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "#20: The penny candy store beyond the El ..." touches on the *otherness* Heaney and Kavanagh sense. For Ferlinghetti, more like Kavanagh than Heaney, that otherness was a magical joy feeling a whole other world just around the corner from our everyday lives. The number 20, by the way, has no particular symbolic importance; it is simply the poem's number in the collection's sequence. Ferlinghetti's classic collection ***A Coney Island of the Mind*** convinced an entire generation that poetry had a life beyond the schoolroom. [9]

#20

The pennycandystore beyond the El
is where I first
                    fell in love
                                  with unreality
Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom
of that September afternoon
A cat upon the counter moved among
                                            the licorice sticks

and tootsie rolls
and Oh Boy Gum

Outside the leaves were falling as they died

A wind had blown away the sun

A girl ran in
Her hair was rainy
Her breasts were breathless in the little room

Outside the leaves were falling
and they cried
Too soon! too soon! [10]

***

As you will have noted, most of the September-themed poems suggest time's passing, the gathering of years, the encroaching end of not only the summer but of life itself. Some of the most powerful find their expression of that sentiment in observations about war. World War I, in particular, evoked any number of meditations upon mortality colored with an autumnal tint. A member of the Boston Brahmin, as they called themselves, Lowell family, who, according to Bostonian cultural lore spoke only to the Cabots who spoke only to God, Amy Lowell's "September, 1918" with its closing lines "For I have time for nothing/But the endeavor to balance myself/Upon a broken world" speaks to that perception. Although World War I dragged to a stalemated conclusion on November 11, 1918, a scant, if one was not in a trench at the front, two months after September, no one in September knew the four-plus years of mechanized butchery would end a mere eight weeks later as they sought to save their mental balance and any sense of normality.

<u>September, 1918</u>

This afternoon was the colour of water falling through sunlight;
The trees glittered with the tumbling of leaves;
The sidewalks shone like alleys of dropped maple leaves,
And the houses ran along them laughing out of square, open windows.
Under a tree in the park,
Two little boys, lying flat on their faces,
Were carefully gathering red berries

To put in a pasteboard box.
Some day there will be no war,
Then I shall take out this afternoon
And turn it in my fingers,
And remark the sweet taste of it upon my palate,
And note the crisp variety of its flights of leaves.
To-day I can only gather it
And put it into my lunch-box,
For I have time for nothing
But the endeavour to balance myself
Upon a broken world. [11]

***

At the other end of the war, in fact, a year before it began in August 1914, William Butler Yeats had this to say about September as he meditated upon another kind of loss. The names he mentions are the first wave of Irish nationalist revolutionaries who lost and, losing, either found refuge in the grave with that Irish everyman O'Leary or emigration to other lands, chiefly America and Australia. They were romantics who thought bright spirits and brave hearts would suffice to end English tyranny only to come up against the truth of armed steel and cold resolve. It was still three years until the Easter Rising in 1916 when Yeats says in another poem "a terrible beauty was born." It would be 10 years until the early 1920s when Michael Collins finally won the Irish a measure of freedom from their English lords, but not a full measure for Ulster remained British.

<u>September 1913</u>

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone;
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time had they to pray

For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the brave?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

Yet could we turn the years again,
And call those exiles as they were
In all their loneliness and pain,
You'd cry, 'Some woman's yellow hair
Has maddened every mother's son':
They weighed so lightly what they gave.
But let them be, they're dead and gone,
They're with O'Leary in the grave. [12]

***

Speaking of English lords, although no aristocrat except of the arts, it was the self-exiled Brit W. H. Auden meditating in a bar on New York City's 52nd Street , on Sept. 1, 1939, who said while thinking of Hitler's invasion of Poland, the failure of appeasement, and the deluge of blood about to fall:

from September 1, 1939

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;

The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night… [13]

In the poem, Auden said “We must love one another or die,” a line he later renounced and rewrote “We must love one another and die.” The conjunctive change is critical, for it hints at his deep despair about human fate. We all must die, and love cannot save us from our end, but love one another we must, or the living becomes unbearable.

***

I wanted to avoid politics for a week or two and discovered it might not be possible, for, as someone said, “The personal is political …” If we can’t figure out how to love one another, or if not love one another, at least abide and tolerate one another, living in these United States might become – well, it doesn’t bear thinking about.

To end with a note of grace, as always, I turn to Mary Oliver. Grace has many definitions; it can mean courteous goodwill, of which there is precious little in our time; it can mean simple elegance and refinement of movement; it can mean a short prayer of thanks; or it can refer to the three graces of Greek mythology signifying charm, grace (elegance), and beauty. Or, it can mean, even in a secular time, the free and unmerited favor of God bestowing blessings. In her “Song for Autumn,” without ever mentioning the word, Oliver bestows upon us all the grace of autumn.

Song for Autumn

In the deep fall
   don’t you imagine the leaves think how
comfortable it will be to touch
   the earth instead of the
nothingness of air and the endless
   freshets of wind? And don’t you think
the trees themselves, especially those with mossy
   warm caves, begin to think

of the birds that will come – six, a dozen – to sleep
   inside their bodies? And don’t you hear
the goldenrod whispering goodbye,
   the everlasting being crowned with the first
tuffets of snow? The pond
   vanishes, and the white field over which
the fox runs so quickly brings out

its blue shadows. And the wind pumps its
bellows. And at evening especially,
the piled firewood shifts a little,
longing to be on its way. [14]

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"Amy Lowell Time magazine cover 1925.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:Amy Lowell Time magazine cover 1925.jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed Sept. 16, 2024.
"William Butler Yeats by George Charles Beresford.jpg" at **Wikimedia Commons** available at File:William Butler Yeats by George Charles Beresford.jpg - Wikimedia Commons accessed Sept. 16, 2024.
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End Notes

1. Crouch, Erin. *"JD Vance says he'll create stories to bring attention to suffering of Americans,"* **Cincinnati Enquirer** (Sept. 15, 2024) available at JD Vance defends spreading of Haitian rumors in CNN interview (cincinnati.com) accessed Sept. 16, 2024.

2. A discussion of this can be found in two ***Book Notes*** on the history of Valentine's Day here Book Notes 88 From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment.pdf (jeserie.org) and here Book Notes 89 Part Two - From Roman Fertility Ritual to Hallmark Moment.pdf (jeserie.org) and in an "American Holiday's" series episode here American Holiday Series - Jefferson Educational Society (jeserie.org).
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8. *"October," in Frost* ***cited above****, p. 27.*
9. I've mentioned Ferlinghetti a number of times over the years, in particular an in-depth look upon the occasion of his death at 102 in February 2021 in ***Book Note #50***, which can be found at book notes- lawrence ferlinghetti.pdf (jeserie.org)
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