

Irene Latham

ARTSPEAK!

Irene Latham's 2015 National Poetry Month Poem-a-Day project





Mother Chicken's Plea

after "The Sick Chicken" by Winslow Homer

So many chicks,
fluffy and strong,
peep-peep-peeping
all morning long.

But that one,
the one in your hands.
His head droops;
he can barely stand.

Won't you help him?
Cast a healing spell?
Make him feel like
he's back (safe!)
inside the shell?

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Self-Portrait as a Country Road

-after "The Road" by Edgar Degas

Unpaved, crooked.
Halfway hidden,
yet known by a dozen
different names.
For the barefooted,
for snakes and rabbits.
A place for those
who can't sing,
to sing.

Sometimes muddy,
sometimes dusty.
No one knows
where it's going:
maybe to a lake,
over a mountain,
into a cave.
It says, *Come.*
Walk a while with me. irenelatham.com



The Dance Lesson

-after "The Dance Lesson" by Edgar Degas

My body
doesn't noodle
as naturally
as theirs do,

so I stretch
and flex,
rehearse
each position
in my mind:

Again!
Open!
Higher!
Again!

I won't give up,
I won't, I won't,
no matter
what they say.

Quarter turn!
Half turn!
Full turn!
Pirouette!

I'll be a prima
ballerina
yet!

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Snake to Butterfly

*-after "Snake and Butterfly," workshop of
Johann Teyler*

First you inched
along on tiny legs,
feasting all the way.

Then those legs
simply disappeared
as you zipped yourself
into a snug new skin.

And now you've shed
that skin (though I don't know how)
and grown yourself
a set of wings!

I do declare
you're the strangest snake
I've ever seen.

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Says Snow in Spring

*-after "New England Farm in Winter"
by unknown 19th Century American artist*

Welcome, blue skies!
Hello, stomping feet!
Thank you for rousing
me from this deep sleep.

Sing to me, Mother,
as you fling the seeds!
Dear chickens, won't you
cluck and chuckle, please?

Thank you, Father, for
throwing the barn doors wide!
How long have I wondered
what hides inside?

This land I love,
it was a beautiful wedding!
Let the spring dance begin
with one last day of sledding!

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The Music Lesson

-after "The Music Lesson: Studio of Gerard ter Borch the Younger" by anonymous artist

When you hold me,
forget your teacher's face,
his pointed finger,
the inked blur of notes
and measures.

Feel the kiss of strings
on your fingertips,
the bumblebee
hummmmmmmmm
entering your chest.

Allow instructions
and mechanics
to puddle beneath your chair,
and you'll find what's left
is *music*.

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Sailor to Dog

-after "Man Crying Out" by Rembrandt

For forty long weeks you
cozied my bunk -

together we weathered
doldrums and gales

until, finally, finally, *Land!*

How your claws clicked
as your paws found ground,

your nubby tail nub-nub-nubbing
as you sailed down the dock.

Now two nights have passed;
our ship strains against its anchor.

Every time the timbers creak,
I reach for you across empty sheets.

Where are you, my friend?
Are you hungry? Cold? Trapped?

Please, Jack.

Please, come back!

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Spearfishing

-after "Fisherman Spearing a Fish"
by John La Farge

pole-thrum
blade-flash
ripple-wish

I want I want I want

a fish

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Totem

*-after "Cutout of Animals," artist unknown
(19th Century American)*

A lion lurks behind your ear –
I want to hear it roar!

A deer steps into the field,
ears flicking, tail twitching.

A camel ambles by,
its canteens bulging with water.

A bear feasts on summer berries,
as a butterfly dries its wings.

The child you were
rides on the back of a giant dog

while the grownup you'll become
hides behind a tree.

A raven settles on a branch –
take flight, it's your time to soar!

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Cat & Bird

- after "Cat Watching Caged Bird" by Jacques Callot

Say, Bird,
how do you like those bars?

Say, Cat,
how do you like that yard?
I've seen the way those dogs bark and guard.

Do you miss the breeze beneath your wings?
Do you remember what it feels like to soar?

Do you realize your questions are a form of torture?
Does asking them make you meow
feel like a roar?

I only want to understand.
I want us to be friends.

We can only be friends
while I am safe in this cage.
There is really nothing else to say.

But, Bird, I can help you escape!
If there's one thing a cat knows, it's how to wait.

Dear, Cat. If there's one thing a bird knows,
it's, 'Never Trust a Cat.'
Now, scat!

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Dear Reader,

-after "Young Girl Reading" by Jean-Honoré Fragonard

**When you hold me
in your hands
just so
I watch your eyes
scan the lines -
did you know?**

**I like the way
your cheeks lift,
and how you laugh
and how you gasp
and how your fingers
breeze across the pages
when my story's
moving fast.**

**Sometimes you cry,
and clasp so tight
that my ink smudges
and my paper crumples.
It's okay. I don't mind.
I wouldn't have it
any other way.**

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Shadow's Song

-after "Woman with a Parasol" by Claude Monet

On my
favorite days
she carries

a parasol
and he wears
that hat.

The sun
beams bright
as a spotlight

and wildflowers
wave
and sway.

See how
my shape lengthens
and my shade

deepens?

Everyone
follows *me*
on days like today!

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Girl, Waiting

- after "The Railway" by Edouard Manet

Today's the day:
Papa's arriving by train!

Could be an hour,
maybe all day.

What will he look like?
What will I say?

We brought the puppy,
and books to read.

I am a princess
in my angel-white dress.

Yet my breath puffs
like an engine's steam.

My teeth grind
like wheels against rail.

What will he look like?
What will I say?

Mama, what if
he doesn't come today?

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A House for all Seasons

-after "The Flower Beds in Holland"

by Vincent Van Gogh

My roof sags
as the garden
spreads its quilt

to welcome bees
and caterpillars
for a picnic.

The farmer
weeds and seeds,
and I wait

for blossoms
to drop,
for bees to buzz
away.

Soon leaves
will blaze
against chilly air

and I will draw
myself up
chimney-straight

to cozy the farmer
with a steady stream
of woodsmoke.

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Prayer of the Black Rocks

- after "*The Black Rocks of Trouville*"
by Gustave Courbet

To the sky:
thank you
for bathing me
in your warm,
rusty glow.

To the waves:
thank you
for your *crash*
and *murmur*,
your *gurgle-swishhhh*.

To the boats,
disappearing:
thank you
for sailing close,
but not too close.

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Yellow Dress

-after "The Bath" by Mary Cassatt

I am washcloth
and towel,
soft as May
sunshine.

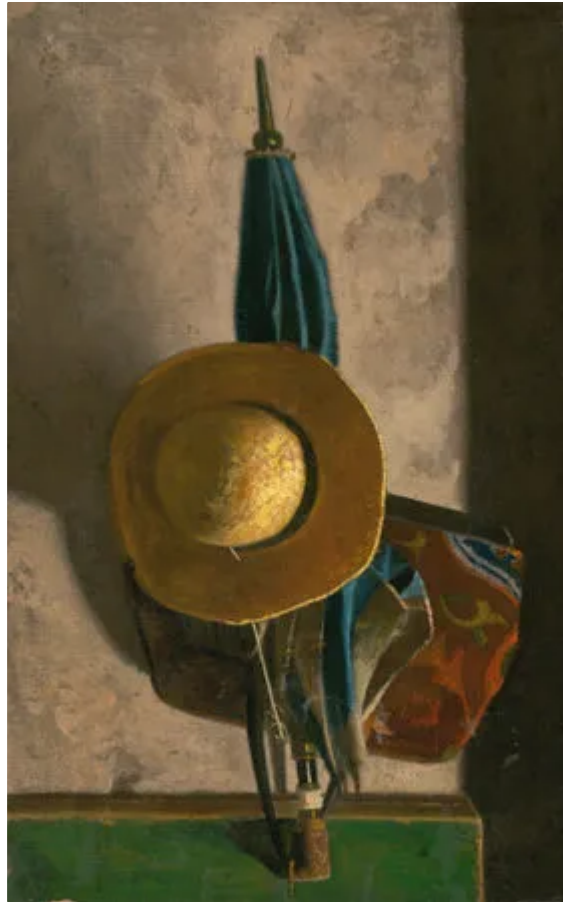
I muffle
and swaddle
and drape.

I'm for
chewing on
and wiping up.

I make tears
disappear.

I smell like milk
and Mama
and home.

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Still Life with Straw Hat, Bag, & Umbrella

-after "Straw Hat, Bag & Umbrella"

by Frederick Peto

This corner
is our coffee shop:
here is where
we talk and talk
and talk -

about yesterday's
sprinkle
and the storm
last year,
the weight
of a tomato,
the fluffy silk
on an ear of corn.

We remember
the breeze
catching us
at the beach,
the bustle and grit
of July city streets.

When you pass by
our corner,
we reach.

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Bottle to Bowl

*-after "Still Life with Bottles and Fruit"
by Alexej von Jawlensky*

I stand
upright
with my top
twisted
tight.

I hide
secrets
inside.

You are
sloping
and open.

You hold
apples
and pears
and more.

You show
me how to
say Yes
to the world.

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Rowing Scene

-after "Rowing Scene" by E. Levy

A thousand footfalls
rattle my banks
as they ready the boats.

The crowd swells
as the rowers stretch
and bounce on their toes.

The smooth fiberglass
glides like a river swan
as the crew digs in:

Check it! Fall out! Look ahead!

My current rushes
them forward
for the final chase.

I gurgle and sparkle.
Without me,
there would be no race!

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Sky, with Horses

*-after "Horses in a Meadow"
by Edgar Degas*

After galloping
like clouds
all morning,

now they grow
still as pigeons
on a rooftop,

whisper like
rain on
alfalfa grass.

They stare
at me as if
I am endless,

and for just
this moment,
I am.

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To the Artist

-after "Head of a Dog" by Auguste Renoir

Your portraits of people
line the hall.

And now you want
to paint *me*,
a dog?

I can't keep the surprise
out of my eyes.

For you, I will sit still,

my little bell-collar
not singing a jingle.

For you, I will wait
without whine or wiggle.

And when you finally
set down your brush

I'll leap into your arms
and lick your cheeks,

my way of saying,
it's a masterpiece! irenelatham.com



Boat in Pond

*-after "Girl in Boat with Geese"
by Berthe Morisot*

Once a tree,

now I sway
to the rhythm
of waves.

I drift,
float,
bobble.

Sometimes
the girl
climbs aboard.

We make
lazy circles
as the pond

ripples
and tickles
my belly.

From the shore
the geese
chatter

and flap -
as if I, too,
have wings.

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What Wind Says

-after "Bathers Caught in a Storm"

by Felix Vollotton

When I grow
weary of
watching
you worship
sun and surf,

I tease
your skirts
and tangle
your hair
into fishnets.

I gather bits
of salt and sand
to fling
at your legs
and faces.

I tumble
your castles
and gust
your beach
ball away.

The sun?
Each day
it comes undone.
And what's the sea
without a breeze?

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Escape of the Toy Horse

- after *Baby at Play* by Thomas Eakins

Oh, Baby
with what easy hands
you construct your towers,
block by block.

But I saw what you
did to Dolly.
I know your teeth that gnaw,
your fingers that poke.

Here I go,
clippety clop clippety clop.
I'm taking my cart
to calmer country.

Shhhh, Baby.
You won't even miss me.
And if you do,
ask Daddy for a truck.

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Sewing Chair

- after "Sewing Chair" by Dorothy Johnson

Me, wait
for you?

That's not
all I do.

Turn me
upside down

and you'll
find proof:

I am also
Spider's

roof.

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Color Talk

-after "Boat and Trees" by Jacoba van
Heemskerck van Beest

**Black says, *this
is a special day.***

**Yellow says,
*it's the sunlight
framing the trees.***

**Blue says, see
*how the lake
gleams?***

Red says, *Look at me!*

**White says,
*oh, please.***

**Green says, *it
would be ordinary
without me.***

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Clothesline Season

*-after "A Monday Washing, New York City,"
19th Century American artist*

**On Mondays
we dress
for dancing.**

**We waltz
with the sun
and wind.**

**Sometimes
clothespins
pinch**

**and birds
dirty
our perches.**

**But we dip
and swing.
We reach.**

**We are the arms
that allow
buildings**

to hold hands.

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Beach Speak of Boys

-after "Four Boys on a Beach" by Winslow Homer

They come
in packs
to puppy-roll
on my sandy
shoulders,

and when they
grow tired
of tumbling,
they stare out
at the ocean,

say, see
that shark?
Dare each other
to swim
past the pier.

No takers,
so they giggle,
play-punch,
and huddle
so close

that I can't
tell where
one boy ends
and the other
begins.

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Friends Like Us

-after "Mortars and Pestles" by Elizabeth Moutal

I'm round
and brown
as the bottom
of an acorn.

I'm maple-leaf red;
I resemble a spool
that's run out of thread.

I'm tall
and green -
an upside-down
bell
that does
so much more
than just
ring.

My rich walnut sides
w i d e n
like a flowerpot
in spring.

*We're all different;
we open our hearts to you just the same.*

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Before the Race

*-after "Riders on the Beach at Dieppe"
by Rene Pierre Charles Princeteau*

Each morning we dig
our hooves in sand,
blow salt-steam
beside crashing waves.

When my rider holds me
to the middle,
I want to buck
and kick and scream!

He pats my neck,
says, *Easy, Boy.*
You want to win this one,
don't you?

I prance and paw,
snort and shake -
then settle in just
behind the leader's flank.

Of course I want to win!
Which is why I'm going to
do what my rider asks ---
wait wait wait wait wait

and then I'll thunder past!

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