

Julian Peters

POEMS TO SEE BY

A Comic Artist Interprets Great Poetry



Maya Angelou · W. H. Auden · e. e. cummings · Emily Dickinson · Tess Gallagher · Robert Hayden
Seamus Heaney · Gerard Manley Hopkins · Langston Hughes · Edna St. Vincent Millay · Edgar Allan Poe
Christina Rossetti · Carl Sandburg · Dylan Thomas · William Wordsworth · W. B. Yeats · and others



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PLOUGH PUBLISHING HOUSE

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*To Ignazio “Cetto” Cattaneo (1939–2006),
who at a crucial time in my life passed on
to me his passion for comics.*



About the artist: Julian Peters is an illustrator and comic book artist living in Montreal, Canada, who specializes in adapting classical poems into graphic art. His work has been exhibited internationally and published in several poetry and graphic art collections. Peters holds a master’s degree in art history and, in 2015, served as Cartoonist in Residence at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand.

Preface

Poetry and comics may seem like an unlikely combination, but the two art forms actually share a number of common elements. For starters, both the poet and the comic artist are concerned with the notion of rhythm – the beats created by the stressed and unstressed syllables and line breaks, or by the arrangement of comics panels and dialogue balloons. There is also the regular repetition of visual elements throughout a comic, which can be compared to the use of rhyme in poetry – take for example a Peanuts cartoon beginning and ending with the same image of Snoopy lying atop his doghouse. Perhaps the most significant parallel, though, at least in relation to this book, is the way both poetry and comics make use of the expressive potential of juxtaposition. In poetry, it is very often in the bringing together of two or more disparate images or concepts that the poetic spark is struck (as in, for example, T. S. Eliot’s description of the evening “spread out against the sky / like a patient etherized upon a table”). In a comic, meaning is often communicated in the contrast between successive panels, as well as in the contrast between the words and the images.

The poetry comics included in this book set out to adapt or, it could be said, translate twenty-four great English-language poems of the last two centuries into the visual language of comics. In the years since I began creating such works, I have often been contacted by teachers who tell me they are using them in their poetry classes. I’m delighted to think that one of my comics may have helped students to better understand a poem, or perhaps clarify their own interpretation of a poem, even if it differs significantly from my own, which is obviously only one of thousands. (As much as it’s true that a picture is worth a thousand words, it’s also the case that a single word can conjure up as many pictures as there are people who read it.)

I must confess, however, that my own motivation in creating these works had little to do with their potential educational uses. The truth is, I did it all for love of beauty. A beautiful poem is pretty much the most beautiful creation I can imagine. And the thing with beauty is that we as human beings are rarely content to simply enjoy it for what it is. If a beautiful stranger catches our eye, we wish we had the courage to go up and say hello. If we come upon a beautiful view, our immediate instinct is to take a picture of it (preferably with ourselves in it). If we hear a beautiful piece of music, we wish we could somehow live inside of it. And though in the end we can never quite hold on to beauty in the way it seems to call upon us to do, that will never stop human beings from trying. In setting out to turn beautiful poetry into comics, I wanted to pay tribute to the way these poems made me feel, to spend time with them, to pull them in as close to me as possible in the way that, as someone who draws comics, felt the most natural.

*Julian Peters
Montreal
November 2019*

WILLIAM ERNEST HENLEY

INVICTUS

OUT OF THE NIGHT THAT COVERS ME,

BLACK AS THE PIT FROM POLE TO POLE,

I THANK WHATEVER GODS
MAY BE



FOR MY UNCONQUERABLE
SOUL.



IN THE FELL CLUTCH OF
CIRCUMSTANCE



I HAVE NOT WINCED NOR
CRIED ALOUD.



UNDER THE BLUDGEONINGS OF CHANCE



MY HEAD IS BLOODY,
BUT UNBOWED.



BEYOND THIS PLACE OF WRATH AND TEARS



LOOMS BUT THE HORROR OF THE SHADE,



AND YET THE MENACE
OF THE YEARS



FINDS, AND SHALL FIND,
ME UNAFRAID.



IT MATTERS NOT HOW
STRAIT THE GATE,



HOW CHARGED WITH
PUNISHMENTS THE SCROLL,



I AM THE MASTER
OF MY FATE:



I AM THE CAPTAIN OF MY SOUL.



INVICTUS

William Ernest Henley

Out of the night that covers me,
 Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
 For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
 My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
 Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
 I am the captain of my soul.

CAGED BIRD

by MAYA ANGELOU

A FREE BIRD LEAPS

ON THE BACK OF THE WIND

AND FLOATS DOWNSTREAM

TILL THE CURRENT ENDS

AND DIPS HIS WING

IN THE ORANGE SUN RAYS

AND DARES TO CLAIM THE SKY.



BUT A BIRD THAT STALKS

DOWN HIS NARROW CAGE

CAN SELDOM SEE THROUGH

HIS BARS OF RAGE

HIS WINGS ARE CLIPPED AND

HIS FEET ARE TIED

SO HE OPENS HIS THROAT TO SING.

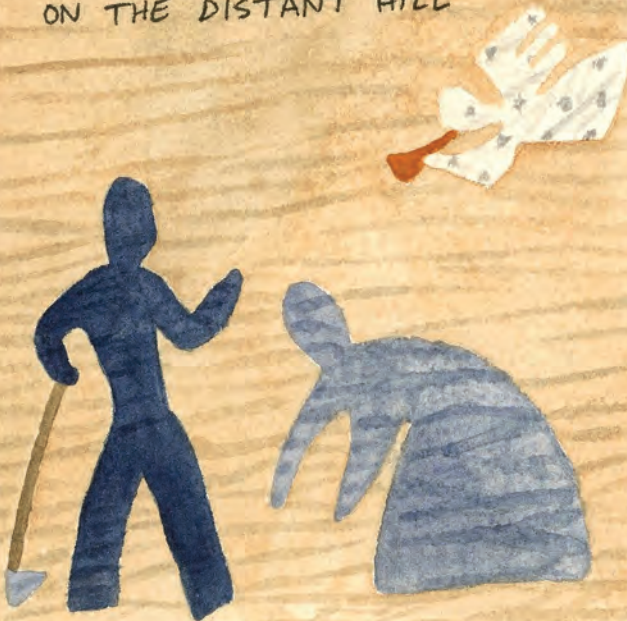
THE CAGED BIRD SINGS
WITH A FEARFUL TRILL



OF THINGS UNKNOWN
BUT LONGED FOR STILL



AND HIS TUNE IS HEARD
ON THE DISTANT HILL



FOR THE CAGED BIRD
SINGS OF FREEDOM.





THE FREE BIRD THINKS OF ANOTHER BREEZE

AND THE TRADE WINDS SOFT

THROUGH THE SIGHING TREES

AND THE FAT WORMS WAITING ON A DAWN BRIGHT LAWN

AND HE NAMES THE SKY HIS OWN

BUT A CAGED BIRD STANDS
ON THE GRAVE OF DREAMS



HIS SHADOW SHOUTS ON A
NIGHTMARE SCREAM



HIS WINGS ARE CLIPPED
AND HIS FEET ARE TIED



SO HE OPENS HIS THROAT
TO SING.



THE CAGED BIRD SINGS
WITH A FEARFUL TRILL
OF THINGS UNKNOWN
BUT LONGED FOR STILL



AND HIS TUNE IS HEARD
ON THE DISTANT HILL



FOR THE CAGED BIRD



SINGS OF FREEDOM.



CAGED BIRD

Maya Angelou

A free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wing
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

e. e. cummings

may my heart always
be open to little

birds who are the
secrets of living



whatever they sing is better than to know



and if men should not hear them men are old

may my mind stroll about
hungry



and fearless and thirsty
and supple



and even if it's sunday may i be wrong



for whenever men are right they are not young

and may myself do
nothing usefully



and love yourself so
more than truly

there's never been quite such a fool who could fail



pulling all the sky over him with one smile

MAY MY HEART ALWAYS BE OPEN

e.e. cummings

may my heart always be open to little
birds who are the secrets of living
whatever they sing is better than to know
and if men should not hear them men are old

may my mind stroll about hungry
and fearless and thirsty and supple
and even if it's sunday may i be wrong
for whenever men are right they are not young

and may myself do nothing usefully
and love yourself so more than truly
there's never been quite such a fool who could fail
pulling all the sky over him with one smile

