



Finding My Elegy: New and Selected Poems

Ursula K. Le Guin

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"She never loses touch with her reverence for the immense what is." — Margaret Atwood

Though internationally known and honored for her imaginative fiction, Ursula K. Le Guin started out as a poet, and since 1959 has never ceased to publish poems. *Finding My Elegy* distills her life's work, offering a selection of the best from her six earlier volumes of poetry and introducing a powerful group of poems, at once earthy and transcendent, written in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The fruit of over a half century of writing, the seventy selected and seventy-seven new poems consider war and creativity, motherhood and the natural world, and glint with humor and vivid beauty. These moving works of art are a reckoning with a whole life.

Finding My Elegy: New and Selected Poems Details

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From Reader Review Finding My Elegy: New and Selected Poems for online ebook

GraceAnne says

These poems are about time and the persistence of memory, about clarity, and about growing older, and about how the past lives in the present and in the future, and how desire never ceases. They are extraordinarily beautiful, and sometimes brought me to the edge of tears.

Maggie Gordon says

I picked this one up to read the day after Le Guin died. It was exceptionally appropriate given a portion of the poems were dealing with her feelings about her own mortality. (Tears) I must admit, Le Guin's poems are not my stylistic preference. There's a lot of nature description that is done well, but doesn't pull me in because I just am not a fan for the most part. However, her more confessional pieces and political lyrics packed quite an emotional punch and I was glad to have read the volume. I will miss this fiery author. She was wise and gifted with words, traits that are on display well on this book of poetry.

Amanda Mecke says

Ursula Le Guin is one of our best American writers, and I can't wait to read her new volume of poetry. If you think you don't like sci fi or fantasy, you can't have read her novels. If you think feminists are all shrill, you haven't read her essays.

Karlan says

I had not realized that the marvelous author of the Earthsea cycle and of many exciting science fiction novels has also published several volumes of poetry. This collection includes poems from 1960 to 2010. The later poems, written by a poet in her 80s, reflect on life and death. This is a good introduction to the poetry of a favorite novelist.

Marianna Monaco says

The pleasure of a treasure hunt.
Here's one:

GPS

I've flown as far as tern or heron fly,
clear to the polar waters, and returned.
I've run the roads of land and sea and sky

right round the earth's horizons. So I learned

that there are two directions, out and back,
from the still center of the compass rose.
There are two places: home, away. I lack
a map that shows me anywhere but those.

Sara says

These are superb poems. My favorites include "The Next War":

It will take place,
It will take time,
It will take life,
And waste them.

and also the poignant "The Aching Air" about the axing of the "most beautiful horsechestnut" tree, apparently a huge tree leaving "only the tall, tree-shaped, empty, aching air".

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I find a great affinity for Ursula K. LeGuin, one that I feel even stronger when I read her poetry. I love her novels, but it is her poems that reveal more about her past, her life, her feelings. We were born within 30 miles of one another, although in different decades, and she now lives an hour from where I grew up. Her stomping grounds are mine. Her poems describe places I have been and loved, from Cannon Beach to the Coastal Starlight (a trip I was supposed to take) - I felt like some of her memories are mine. A strange experience when reading poetry. I'm more accustomed to understanding an emotion if not the subject, but that experience is reversed for me.

One of her older poems, *For the New Home* stuck out to me, for it serves as a very wise blessing. The last line is "And may you be in this house as the music is in the instrument."

In her last set of poems, she takes the opposite approach and curses men involved in war in a very memorable poem, *The Curse of the Prophetess*. It reads like an actual, witchy incantation, with power behind the words.

In between the blessings and the curses are poems about relationships, nature, and aging. I enjoyed them!

Ann Schwader says

As the title suggests, this is an extremely mixed assortment of Le Guin poems -- all well-crafted, many formal or approaching formal, but few actual speculative poems. Readers expecting SF / fantasy poetry are likely to be disappointed, as most are nature-based or philosophical (or both!).

The collection is divided into two sections: *Wild Fortune* and *Life Sciences*. The former includes selected poems from several of Le Guin's previous collections (1960-2005). The latter presents new poems from 2006-2010. Many of these newer works deal with memory, time, and/or the experience of aging. The title poem is one of these, and (to my mind) exceptional, as is the collection's final poem, "The Conference."

I took some time getting through this book, renewing it twice from my library. It was well worth my effort, though the didactic tone of several poems in the earlier section gave me trouble. I also had to be in the mood for Le Guin's personal take on the world in order to experience the subtle pleasures of her poetry. Readers who appreciate understated formalism, the outdoors, or a spare, haiku-like vision are most likely to enjoy what's on offer here.

Sally Ember says

Homage to and Review of *Finding My Elegy: New and Selected Poems* by Ursula K. Le Guin

Ursula K. Le Guin is my favorite writer. No contest.

I have enjoyed, admired, appreciated, envied and learned from her novels, novellas, short stories, essays, and poetry for over forty years. She is about my mom's age (in her early 80s, now) and still going strong. She is my idol, my mentor, and my role model. I also found out, after reading this collection, that she and share not only a love of writing, speculative fiction, feminism, social justice, pacifism and environmentalism, but Buddhism and meditation. Ah, pure bliss!

This latest collection of her poetry so delighted me that I had to write not just a short review on Amazon or Goodreads, but an entire blog post, complete with images, video, quotes. I hope you run right out and buy, borrow or sit and read aloud from this collection ASAP. You will be glad you did.

Poetry is meant to be read aloud. I enjoy reading poetry aloud as if I am the poet, wondering as I hear each word, line, idea, image, stanza, what the poet was imagining and how this exact turn of phrase came to capture it. Knowing how long many poets take to conjure the precise manner in which to describe and evoke every part of their intention, I want to savor it.

I do NOT read in that artificial, almost-questioning (upturned inflection on the end of lines), drawling almost-monotone that many poetry readers make the horrible mistake of using.

No.

I read poetry aloud as if each poem is its own story, because this unique version of that story is interesting, new, and not mine. I use the line breaks and punctuation as suggestions to help me go with the poet's flow. I smile, I laugh, I pause, I taste the words on my tongue.

Try it. You'll like it!

Le Guin has many poems rooted (pun intended) in nature. This little bird caught her attention several times. She mentions the **Swainson's Thrush** by name; sometimes it is unnamed and alluded /referred to throughout this collection.

I had to find what the **Swainson's Thrush** looks and sounds like. Enjoy!

[youtube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpLnR...>]

I marked pages of this book with pieces of scrap paper so I'd remember which stanzas, poems, titles, lines caught my heart. Here are some, in no particular order. I sometimes annotate or explain. Find your own parts to love and for your own reasons.

I want to give this poem, *For the New House*, to my son and his wife when they find their first home to purchase. I adore the entire poem, and here are my favorite lines:

For the New House

And may you be in this house
as the music is in the instrument.

I also welled up with tears reading this next one, *Song for a Daughter*, imagining myself as a new mom hearing this from my mom, and sharing this with my son's wife should she/they be lucky enough to have a child. Le Guin captures so much of the complexity of these relationships elegantly and succinctly, with beautiful turns of phrase, like these from the first and final stanzas:

Song for a Daughter

Mother of my granddaughter
listen to my song:
A mother can't do right,
a daughter can't be wrong....

Granddaughter of my mother,
listen to my song:
Nothing you do will ever be right,
nothing you do is wrong.

Soldiers perfectly depicts the horribleness of most wars, particularly our most recent USA-led wars, in which the military industrial complex---to enrich corporations---sends/inspires young men (and women) to go to their deaths or disfigurements with lies and for specious causes. The anguished images of this powerful poem end with this, which completed the breaking of my heart:

Soldiers

And soldiers still will fill the towns
In blue or khaki clad,
The brave, the good, who march to kill
What hope we ever had.

Unsurprisingly, given the title, and with Le Guin's being both a Buddhist (we meditate daily on impermanence) and in her 80s, much of the poems in this collection are concerned with the end of life: the end of her own life, the changing of the seasons, the ruination of nature and places. She draws upon rich and varied imagery from many religious/spiritual traditions, employing words and phrases from several languages and invoking aspects of the rituals of Native Americans/Native Canadians and other indigenous peoples (harkening to her anthropologist father's influence, as always), among others.

I especially liked *Every Land* (which starts with an epigram from Black Elk), in which she repeats this line, "Every land is the holy land," at the end of each of the three stanzas, like a wistful refrain.

From one of the longer poems, *At Kishamish*, which is divided into named sections, these lines from "Autumnal" were quite moving. They eloquently evoke the juxtaposition of being somewhere now, when we're so much older, suffused with so many memories of having lived and been at that same place so many times with our children as our younger selves:

At Kishamish

AUTUMNAL

It's strange to see these hills with present eyes
I hold so clear in my mind always, strange once more
to hear the hawk cry down along the meadows
and smell the tarweed, to be here---here at the ranch,
so old, where I was young---it hurts my heart.

One of the "good-bye" poems here could make a statue cry: *Aubade*, which means "a song or poem to greet the dawn." The term is unironically used here as the poem's title. Le Guin simply depicts what might be said between lovers or long-time intimate friends or family members who must now part due to death. She frames it perfectly in two gorgeous stanzas, which I quote here in their entirety:

Aubade

Few now and faint the stars that shone
all night so bright above you.
The sun must rise, and I be gone.
I leave you, though I love you.

We have lived well, my love, and so
let not this parting grieve you.
Sure as the sunrise you must know
I love you, though I leave you.

Tibetan Buddhists talk about the "between place," the *Bardo*, the state between a person's pre-birth to our birth, and of the time between our body's death and the shifting of our consciousness to our next incarnation. Le Guin speaks to this and illustrates her readiness, willingness, almost eagerness to "move on" to be *In the Borderlands*. Fittingly, this poem is placed on one of the last pages of this collection. Le Guin leaves us considering her perspective in this way, putting her thoughts of yearning to leave her body into this poem in the form of a conversation between her soul and her body, ending it in this final stanza with gentle humor and grace:

In the Borderlands

Soon enough, my soul replies,
you'll shine in star and sleep in stone,
when I who troubled you a while with eyes
and grief and wakefulness am gone.

Thank you, Ursula, for sharing your deep and soulful moments with us all. Once again, due to your artistry with words and your generosity and intelligence, you have paved the way for me and others to follow with some surcease from pain and lighter hearts as we face our own partings, disappointments and deaths.

image from her website, photo ©by Marian Wood Kolisch

May your contributions to our literary and emotional landscapes always be known as blessings while you still live and after you die, and may all beings benefit.

Find these poems, this and all her other work here: <http://www.ursulakleguin.com> Her latest poetry collection, *Late in the Day*, is my next poetry read!

Nikki says

I haven't read much of Le Guin's poetry, but I gobbled up this collection. I'm not sure I always think she's got the form right -- though I'm a sucker for very tightly circumscribed forms of poetry, so perhaps I would think that -- but the way she uses words can rarely be faulted.

My favourite for now is 'Ars Lunga': *so that death finds me at all times/ and on all sides exposed,/ unfortressed, undefended,/ inviolable, vulnerable, alive...*

Teresa says

Beautiful and heartbreaking. Of course there were a few that really didn't work for me, but that's any book of poetry. On the whole it was amazing. I loved it so much I'm going to have to revisit A Wizard of Earthsea, despite hating it the first go-round.

Wealhtheow says

For decades, Ursula K Le Guin has written some of the best sf/f in the world. Unbeknownst to me, she also writes poetry and has published 11 other collections. This is a collection of the "best" poems she published between 1960 and 2010.

Her early work reminds me of a cross between ee cummings and Mary Oliver, but it didn't particularly inspire me. The first poem I loved in this collection was "The Aching Air," about a "beautiful horsechestnut" that "held up deep branches/in a cathedral/full of wings and voices/and a golden light" that is cut down in the interests of cleanliness in a series of harrowing stanzas and ends

"No fall,
all fall.
All clean.
All bare.
Only the tall,
tree-shaped, empty,
aching air."

Another poem I loved concerned an ornery black cat who lives on the porch and won't leave or come in, and ends:

"I leave the door wide.
She does not come in.
Self-contained, but never placid,
she crouches near her refuge chair,
even in her sleep alert, aware.
I can't judge if she is or is not unhappy.
She's certainly unlucky,
less so than many cats.
She accepts, she does not beg.
She is wholly respectable.

While I'm here to feed her twice a day
she has some ease. When I'm gone,
if the next tenant doesn't,
well, she'll get bone-thin again,
get lame again, get sick and hide and die.

Or a car or a dog will kill her.

Turn as we may in our wonderful ease-making words,

we cannot co-opt her freedom.

We can live with her

only on her hard terms."

But I think my favorite poems are at the end of the collection, which mostly concern old age, death, and what is left behind. In that section is where I found the eponymous poem, "Finding My Elegy," which contains these lines:

"Numbers are easier. So the men of money say
numbers, not names. Grief's not their business.

But I think it may be mine, and if I have
a people any more, I will find them in tears."

Grady says

The World and Living in Retrospect and In Present Observation

For those unfamiliar with this impressive poet, Ursula Kroeber Le Guin (born October 21, 1929) is an American author of novels, children's books, and short stories, mainly in the genres of fantasy and science fiction. She has also written poetry and essays. First published in the 1960s, her work explores alternative imaginings of sexuality, religion, politics, anarchism, ethnography, and gender. She is influenced by central figures of Western literature, including feminist writers like Virginia Woolf, and also by modern fantasy and science fiction writers, Norse mythology, and books from the Eastern tradition such as the Tao Te Ching. In turn, she has influenced Booker prize winners and other writers, such as Salman Rushdie and David Mitchell-- and notable futurism and fantasy writers like Neil Gaiman and Iain Banks. She has won various awards, including the Hugo, Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy Award multiple times.'

This book of poems spans from 1960 to the present and reveals the artist as a seer, observer, reformer, pacifist, naturalist, and humorist - each descriptor meant in the highest of compliments. A reader cannot step away from Le Guin's poetry without being at once dazzled and moved. The opening poem, an early one is

SONG

O when I was a dirty little virgin
I'd sit and pick my scabby knees
and dream about some man of thirty
and doing nothing did what I pleased.

A woman gets and is begotten on,
have and receive is feminine for life.

I knew it, I knew it even then:
what after all did I have to give?

A flowing cup, a horn of plenty
fulfilled with more than she can hold,
but the milk and honey will be emptied,
emptied out, as she grows old.

More inward than sex or even womb,
inmost in woman is a girl intact,
the dirty little virgin who sits and dreams
and has nothing to do with fact.

Two pacifist poems follow:
HERE, THERE, AT THE MARSH
The papers are full of war and
my head is full of the anguish of battles
and ruin of ancient cities.

In the rainy light a great blue heron
lifts and flies above the brown cattails
heavy, tender, and pitiless.

THE NEXT WAR

It will take place,
it will take time,
it will take life,
and waste them.

But Le Guin can sing songs more gently, recalling hues of the past as in:

SEVEN LINES TO ELISABETH

Come back my daughter and make me another
mild posole, two anchos but no jalapeños.
Play Bach on the cello. Make me a mother
again as you did many years ago now.
Reawaken the old house with music and tears.
Whatever you do, always do it wholly.
O child come back, make me another posole.

The poetry of Ursula K Le Guin is in toto an elegy for one of the more sensitive, outspoken, and important poets of our time. This is a rich book of works that must be read.

Grady Harp

John says

The Best of the Beginning and the Latest Poetry from Ursula Le Guin

"Finding My Elegy" is a literary celebration of Ursula Le Guin's decades-long oeuvre in poetry, demonstrating that she is as much a master of this genre as she is of speculative fiction and fantasy. If nothing else, this relatively slim volume should demonstrate her considerable range and talent as a poet, drawing originally from the fantastical realms conjured in her "Ekumen" and "Earthsea" novels and stories, and then, later, drawing on subjects as diverse as her longstanding love of nature and her intensely felt commentary on social and political affairs both here in the United States and abroad.

One of my favorite poems, her ode to the great classical singer Ian Bostridge, demonstrates the intense richness and the elegant simplicity of her literary craft:

Lieder Singer

To Ian Bostridge

He stands by the piano, tall and lean
in black, unsmiling. His hands are tense.
Men are unlikely instruments.
A piano too, a strange awkward thing.

He looks out through the audience
waiting for the accompanist to begin
the running rolling subtle Schubert tune
His gaze changes as he starts to sing.

Now he sees nothing. Is he seen?
Where is he now in these long-drawn laments.
these soft rejoicings in a summer dawn?
Like Echo hidden near the hidden spring,

unbodied to music, he consents
to be nothing but voice, the rest is gone.

J. says

An excellent anthology. Though there were two poems that, on a moral ground, I really felt uncomfortable with, this book deserves five stars. Le Guin continues to find such magic and beauty in everyday life. Really astounding.
