FIRST SET – 15 poems

1. William Blake’s “The Sick Rose”

O Rose thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

[Is there metaphor in this poem? Describe it. What is this poem really about? Hint: not plants and worms.]

2. William Blake’s “Ah! Sun-flower”

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the travelers journey is done.

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow:
Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

[“clime” means “climate”; what does “aspire” mean? what is ironic about the relationship between heaven and earth in this poem? what is ironic about time and timelessness in this poem?]
3. William Blake’s “To the Accuser Who Is the God of This World”

Truly My Satan thou art but a Dunce
And dost not know the Garment from the Man
Every Harlot was a Virgin Once
Nor canst thou change Kate into Nan

Tho thou art Worshipd by the Names Divine
Of Jesus & Jehovah: thou art still
The Son of Morn in weary Nights decline
The lost Travellers Dream under the hill

[“Kate” was a name that suggested “virgin” and “Nan” suggested “slut”; Satan’s other name, “Lucifer” means “morning star” in Latin; why can’t Satan change Kate to Nan? where is the true, good god in this poem? What is the metaphor in the last line?]

4. Wordsworth’s “A Slumber did my Spirit Seal”

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

[diurnal means “day and night”; who is she? where is she? Is the poet’s vision of her comforting or not?]
5. William Butler Yeats’s “The Falling of the Leaves”

Autumn is over the long leaves that love us,
And over the mice in the barley sheaves;
Yellow the leaves of the rowan above us,
And yellow the wet wild-strawberry leaves.

The hour of the waning of love has beset us,
And weary and worn are our sad souls now;
Let us part, ere the season of passion forget us,
With a kiss and a tear on thy drooping brow.

[“rowan” is a kind of tree; discuss the repetition of sound: good or bad and why? What is the metaphor here? What is the speaker’s proposition to his audience? Do you think it is a good idea?]

6. Herman Melville’s “Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem”

Found a family, build a state,
The pledged event is still the same:
Matter in end will never abate
His ancient brutal claim.

Indolence in heaven’s ally here,
And energy the child of hell:
The Good Man pouring from his pitcher clear,
But brims the poisoned well.

[Describe the metaphors here. Theme: what does Melville think you should do with your time, and why? What would he have to say to a couch-potato? How about someone working for a presidential candidate?]
7. Emily Dickinson’s “Tell all the Truth”

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise
As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—

[What is the major metaphor here? What does this tell us about the nature of poetry, her poetry in particular?]

8. Emily Dickinson’s “By a Departing Light”

By a departing light
We see acuter, quite,
Than by a wick that stays.
There’s something in the flight
That clarifies the sight
And decks the rays.

[Do we see better by a departing light, or is this a metaphor, and if it is, describe it.]
9. Emily Dickinson’s “Through what transports of Patience”

Through what transports of Patience  
I reached the stolid Bliss  
To breathe my Blank without thee  
Attest me this and this –  
By that bleak exultation  
I won as near as this  
Thy privilege of dying  
Abbreviate me this

[Use the dictionary. What does “bleak exultation” mean? Who is the speaker? Where is she? Who might she be talking to?]

10. Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Eagle”

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

[look for the repetition of sound here. Describe the metaphors.]

11. Charles Wright’s “Landscape with Missing Overtones”

The sun has set behind the Blue Ridge,  
And evening with its blotting paper lifts off the light.  
Shadowy yards.  
Moon through the white pines.

[Discuss metaphor and irony here.]
12. Charles Wright’s “In Praise of Hand Shan”

Cold Mountain and Cold Mountain became the same thing in the mind,
The first last seen slipping into a crevice in the second.

Only the poems remained, scrawled on the rocks and trees,
Nothing’s undoing among the self-stung unfolding of things.

[Look at the second half of the poem and tell me, what are the two things being related here? Look at the first half next and tell me why he says “Cold Mountain” twice? These things are related.]

13. Russell Edson’s “The Fall”

There was a man who found two leaves and came indoors holding them out saying to his parents that he was a tree.

To which they said then go into the yard and do not grow in the living room as your roots may ruin the carpet.

He said I was fooling I am not a tree and he dropped his leaves.

But his parents said look it is fall.

[What does this poem tell us about metaphor?]
14. John Ashbery’s “This Room”

The room I entered was a dream of this room.
Surely all those feet on the sofa were mine.
The oval portrait
of a dog was me at an early age.
Something shimmers, something is hushed up.

We had macaroni for lunch every day
except Sunday, when a small quail was induced
to be served to us. Why do I tell you these things?
You are not even here.

[There is a theory that everything in a dream is really a reflection of you,
or a symbol for you and your life. What does this poem tell us about
poetry? Ashbery put it as the first in a collection of poetry by him – it is
sort of an introduction. Why?]

15. James Tate’s “Goodtime Jesus”

Jesus got up one day a little latter than usual. He had been dreaming so
deeep there was nothing left in his head. What was it? A nightmare, dead
bodies walking all around him, eyes rolled back, skin falling off. But he
wasn’t afraid of that. It was a beautiful day. How ‘bout some coffee?
Don’t mind if I do. Take a little ride on my donkey, I love that donkey.
Hell, I love everybody.

[Is this even a poem? It does appear in a book called “Selected Poetry.”
What is the point of this? Why is it funny?]
SECOND SET – 16 poems

1a. Robert Herrick’s “Upon Julia’s Clothes”

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then (methinks) how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes.

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see
That brave vibration each way free,
O how that glittering taketh me!

[“whenas” means “when”; “methinks” mean “I think”; figure out what
“liquefaction” means; “mine” means “my”; “taketh” means “takes”]

2a. Walter Savage Landor’s “Dirce”

Stand close around, ye Stygian set,
With Dirce in one boat conveyed!
Or Charon, seeing, may forget
That he is old and she a shade.

[“Dirce” was an ancient beauty; “Charon” is a mythical old man who
ferries people to the land of the dead eternally; “stygian” means
“relating to the afterlife” What is ironic about this poem?]

3a. Walter Savage Landor’s “On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday”

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife:
Nature I loved, and next to Nature, art.
I warmed both hands before the fire of Life;
It sinks; and I am ready to depart.
Landor was expelled from Oxford for shooting out his tutor’s window with a gun. He died at the age of 100. What is ironic here? What is the metaphor here?

4a. Walter Savage Landor’s “Rose Aylmer, 1779-1800”

Ah what avails the sceptred race,  
Ah what the form divine!  
What every virtue, every grace!  
Rose Aylmer, all were thine.  
Rose Aylmer, whom these wakeful eyes  
May weep, but never see,  
A night of memories and of sighs  
I consecrate to thee.

[Is this a nice thing to say? What does consecrate mean?]

5a. Henry David Thoreau’s “My Life”

My life has been the poem I would have writ,  
But I could not both live and utter it.

[Theme: what is the relationship between art and life, according to Thoreau?]

6a. Walt Whitman’s “As Adam Early in the Morning”

As Adam early in the morning,  
Walking forth from the bower refresh’d with sleep,  
Behold me where I pass, hear my voice, approach,  
Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass,  
Be not afraid of my body.

[What makes this poem different from others your have read? What is the metaphor here?]
7a. Emily Dickinson’s “The Heart Asks Pleasure”

The Heart asks Pleasure – first –
And then – excuse from Pain –
And then – those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering —

And then – to go to sleep —
And then – if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die –

[“Anodynes” are painkillers. Who is the Inquisitor? What is life like, as she describes it?]

8a. Emily Dickinson’s “The Bustle in a House”

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth—

The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

[Describe the major metaphor.]
9a. Emily Dickinson’s “Fame is a Bee”

Fame is a bee.
It has a song—
It has a sting—
Ah, too, it has a wing.

[This is a triple metaphor – for each describe what two things are being compared and what they have in common.]

10a. William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheelbarrow”

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

[What principle is guiding Williams decision to start a new line, besides writing three words, then one word? Is this a good poem?]

11a. Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
petals on a wet black bough.

[The Metro is a subway platform. What is the metaphor here? Is this a good poem?]
12a. Charles Wright’s “The Wind is Calm and Comes From Another World”

Overcast August morning.

A little rain in the potholes,
A little shade on the shade.
The world is unconversational, and bides its own sweet time.
What you see is what you see, it seems to say, but we
Know better than that,

and keep our eyes on the X, the cloud-ridden sky.

Heliotrope we say, massaging its wings. Heliotrope.

[“Heliotrope” refers to plants that turn toward the sun – “helio” means sun, and “trope” means turn. But trope means something else that will tell you what this poem is about. What does “inspiration” mean – where does it come from? Why does the poet look at the X and not at the world?]

13a. James Merrill’s “Oranges”

Segment by segment, nonetheless a mind
Made up of taste and sunlight. May the blind
Gods who drink its juice be satisfied,
Disposing gently of the empty rind.

[Describe the metaphor and tell me what is the poet’s relationship to the universe?]

14a. John Ashbery’s “The Cathedral is”

slated for demolition.
15a. Rochelle Kraut’s “My Makeup”

on my cheeks I wear
the flush of two beers

on my eyes I use
the dark circles of sleepless nights
to great advantage

for lipstick
I wear my lips

[What makes this poem original, compared to poems about women in the past?]

16a. James Tate’s “Teaching the Ape to Write Poems”

They didn’t have much trouble
teaching the ape to write poems:
first they strapped him into the chair,
then they tied the pencil around his hand
(the paper had already been nailed down).
Then Dr. Bluespire leaned over his shoulder
and whispered into his ear:
“You look like a good sitting there.
Why don’t you try writing something?”

[What does this poem tell us about the creation of poetry and words like “genius” and “inspiration”?]