

The Donkey & the Meaning of Eternity: A Love Letter to Life by Maria Popova

Beneath our anxious quickenings, beneath our fanged fears, beneath the rusted armors of conviction, tenderness is what we long for — tenderness to salve our bruising contact with reality, to warm us awake from the frozen stupor of near-living.

Tenderness is what permeates *Platero and I* (public library) by the Nobel-winning Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (December 23, 1881–May 29, 1958) — part love letter to his beloved donkey, part journal of ecstatic delight in nature and humanity, part fairy tale for the lonely.

Healer on a Donkey by Niko Pirosmani, early 1900s.

Living in his birthplace of Moguer — a small town in rural Andalusia — Jiménez began composing this uncommon posy of prose poems in 1907. Although it spans less than a year in his life with Platero, it took him a decade to publish it.

At its heart is a simple truth: What and whom we love is a lens to focus our love of life itself.

The tenderness with which Jiménez regards Platero — whom he addresses by name over and over, like an incantation of love — is the tenderness of living with wonder and fragility. He celebrates Platero's "big gleaming eyes, of a gentle firmness, in which the sun shines"; he reverences him as "friend to the old man and the child, to the stream and the butterfly, to the sun and the dog, to the flower and the moon, patient and pensive, melancholy and lovable, the Marcus Aurelius of the meadows." He beckons him: "Come with me. I'll teach you the flowers and the stars."

And so he does:

Look, Platero, so many roses are falling everywhere: blue, pink, white, colorless roses... You'd think the sky was crumbling into roses... You'd think that from the seven galleries of Paradise roses were being thrown onto the earth... Platero, it seems, while the Angelus is ringing, that this life of ours is losing its everyday strength, and that a different strength from within, loftier, more constant, and purer, is causing everything, as if in fountain jets of grace... Your eyes, which you can't see, Platero, and which you are mildly raising skyward, are two beautiful roses.

Together, poet and donkey traverse the Andalusian countryside in a state of rapturous

harmony with each other and the living world:

Through the low-lying roads of summer, draped with tender honeysuckle, how sweetly we go! I read, or sing, or recite poetry to the sky. Platero nibbles the sparse grass of the shady banks, the dusty blossoms of the mallows, the yellow sorrel. He halts more than he walks. I let him.

[...]

Every so often Platero stops eating and looks at me. Every so often I stop reading and look at Platero.

There are echoes of Whitman in Jiménez's exultations:

Before us are the fields, already green. Facing the immense, clear sky, of a blazing indigo, my eyes — so far from my ears! — open nobly, welcoming in its calm that indescribable placidity, that harmonious, divine serenity which dwells in the limitlessness of the horizon.

Art by Ryōji Arai from Every Color of Light

This longing for the infinite accompanies the young man and the old donkey as they cross the hills and valleys on their daily pilgrimages:

The evening extends beyond its normal limits, and the hour, infected with eternity, is infinite, peaceful, unfathomable.

Again and again, Platero's presence magnifies the poet's relishing of beauty, deepens his contact with the eternal:

I remain in ecstasy before the twilight. Platero, his black eyes scarlet with sunset, walks gently to a puddle of crimson, pink, and violet waters; he softly immerses his lips into the mirrors, which seem to liquefy as he touches them.

Punctuating these ecstasies are the inevitable spells of melancholy stemming from the fact that the price of being awake to life is being also awake to mortality. Aware that this enchanted life with his beloved Platero is only for the time being, Jiménez reaches into the sorrow of the future to consecrate it with joy:

Platero. I shall bury you at the foot of the large, round pine in the orchard at La Piña, which you like so much. You will remain alongside cheerful, serene life. The little boys will play and the little girls will sew beside you on their little low chairs. You will get to hear

the verses that the solitude will inspire in me. You'll hear the older girls singing when they wash clothes in the orange grove, and the sound of the waterwheel will be a joy and a solace to your eternal peace. And all year long the goldfinches, greenfinches, and vireos, in the perennial freshness of the treetop, will create for you a small musical ceiling between your tranquil slumber and Moguer's infinite, ever-blue sky.

I read these pages thinking how everything we polish with attention becomes a mirror. So too the donkey becomes a mirror for the poet's own soul:

Every so often Platero stops drinking and raises his head, like me, like the women in Millet's paintings, to the stars, with a soft, infinite yearning.

Art by Ryōji Arai from Every Color of Light

Emanating from these vignettes is a reminder that the art of poetry, like the art of living, is a matter of the quality of attention we pay to things — a living affirmation of Simone Weil's insistence that "attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer." Jiménez exults:

What a morning! The sun poses its silver-and-gold cheerfulness on the earth; butterflies of a hundred colors play everywhere, among the flowers, through the house (now inside, now out), on the fountain. All over, the countryside opens up into crackings and creakings, into a boiling of healthy new life.

It's as if we were inside a huge honeycomb of light which was also the interior of an immense, flaming-hot rose.

One clear blue morning, the poet and the donkey come upon a gang of "treacherous boys" who have spread a net to catch birds from the nearby pinewood. Overcome by compassion for Platero's "brethren of the sky," Jiménez sets out to warn the birds in a scene that, once again, ends with the infinite sympathy that flows between him and his donkey:

I mounted Platero and urged him onward with my legs, and at a sharp trot we ascended to the pinewood. When we arrived below the shady leafy cupola, I clapped my hands, sang, and shouted. Platero, catching the mood, brayed roughly a couple of times. And the deep, resonant echoes replied, as if from the depths of a large well. The birds flew away to another pinewood, singing.

Platero, amid the distant curses of the violent little boys, was brushing his big shaggy head against my heart, thanking me until he hurt my chest.

Art by Spanish artist Roc Riera Rojas from a rare edition of Don Quixote

Jiménez's bright sympathy with living things extends beyond the world of animals. It is in these bonds of sympathy, of interbeing, that he finds the portal to the eternal:

Whenever I halt, Platero, I seem to be halting beneath the pine of La Corona... spreading green plentitude below the broad blue sky with white clouds... How strong I always feel when I rest beneath its memory! When I grew up, it was the only thing that didn't cease to be big, the only thing that became bigger all the time. When they cut off that bough which the hurricane had broken, I thought a limb of my own had been pulled out; and at times, when some pain seizes on me unexpectedly, I imagine that it hurts the pine of La Corona.

[...]

The word "great" befits it as it does the sea, the sky, and my heart. In its shade many generations have rested, looking at the clouds, for centuries, as if on the water, beneath the sky, and in the nostalgia of my heart. When my thoughts wander freely and the arbitrary images settle whenever they wish, or in those moments when there are things that are seen as if by second sight, apart from that which is distinctly perceived, the pine of La Corona, transfigured into some picture of eternity, comes to my mind, more rustling and more gigantic yet, amid my doubts, beckoning me to repose in its peace, as if it were the true and eternal terminus of my journey through life.

Trees figure amply in Jiménez's poetic imagination:

This tree, Platero, this acacia which I planted myself, a green flame that went on growing, spring after spring, and which now covers us with its abundant free-growing foliage, shot through with the setting sun, was the best support of my poetry as long as I lived in this house, now shut. Any one of its boughs, adorned with emerald in April or gold in October, cooled my brow if I just looked at it a moment, like the purest hand of a Muse.

Art by Art Young from *Trees at Night*, 1924. (Available as a print.)

Pulsating beneath all the vignettes is a deep sense of the poet's unbroken solitude — even in the company of his donkey, even in his absolute presence with the living world. On a late-summer Sunday, reading Omar Khayyam under a pine tree "full of birds that don't fly away" while the rest of town goes to church, he writes:

In the silence between two peals, the inner seething of the September morning acquires presence and resonance. The black-and-gold wasps fly around the grapevine laden with healthy bunches of muscat, and the butterflies, which are confusedly mingled with the flowers, seem to be renewed, in a metamorphosis of bright colors, as they flutter about.

The solitude is like a great thought of light.

It is in this wakeful solitude amid nature that he finds what so long for — beauty, serenity, eternity:

How beautiful the countryside is on these holidays when everyone abandons it! At most, in a young vineyard, in an orchard, some old man may be leaning against an unripe vine, above the pure stream... And one's soul, Platero, feels like the true queen of what it possesses by virtue of its feelings, of the large healthy body of nature, which, when respected, gives the man who deserves it the submissive spectacle of its resplendent, eternal beauty.

Alongside Jiménez's reverence of the eternal is his elegy for the passage of time, for the aching beauty of our mortal transience. When autumn comes, he writes:

Platero, the sun is already starting to feel too lazy to get out of its sheets, and the farmers are up earlier than he is... On the broad, moist path the yellow trees, sure that they'll be green again, brightly light our rapid journey on both sides, like soft bonfires of clear gold.

[...]

These are the instants in which life is entirely contained in the departing gold.... Beauty makes eternal this fleeting moment without heartbeat, as if everlastingly dead while still alive.

Over and over, Jiménez syncopates between exultation and lament:

See how the setting sun, manifesting itself large and scarlet, as a visible god, draws to itself the ecstasy of all things and, in the strip of sea behind Huelva, sinks into the absolute silence that the world — that is, Moguer, its countryside, you, and I, Platero — pay to it in homage.

Over and over, he returns to the elemental truth of being, found in every flower and in every star — that to be alive just this moment, any moment, is enough, is eternity:

Platero, Platero! I'd give my whole life and I'd long for you to want to give yours, in exchange for the purity of this deep January night, lonely bright, and firm.

When Platero does eventually give his life, the poet meets his death with the same largehearted longing for the eternal that lives in everything ephemeral. Visiting Platero's grave with the village children that had so loved him, he writes:

"Platero, my friend!" I said to the earth. "If, as I believe, you are now in a meadow in

heaven, carrying adolescent angels on your shaggy back, can you perhaps have forgotten me? Platero, tell me: do you still remember me?"

And, as if in reply to my question, a weightless white butterfly, which I had never seen before, fluttered persistently, like a soul, from iris to iris.

The closing pages become part rhapsody and part requiem, concentrating and consecrating the tenderness that had scored the poet's life with his donkey:

Sweet trotting Platero, my little donkey who carried my soul so often — only my soul! — over those low-lying roads of prickly pears, mallows, and honeysuckles; to you I dedicate this book which speaks of you, now that you can understand it.

Art by Ivan Bilibin, 1906. (Available as a print and as stationery cards.)

Couple the soul-slaking Platero and I with the bittersweet story of Civilón — the real-life Spanish bull who inspired the beloved children's book Ferdinand.