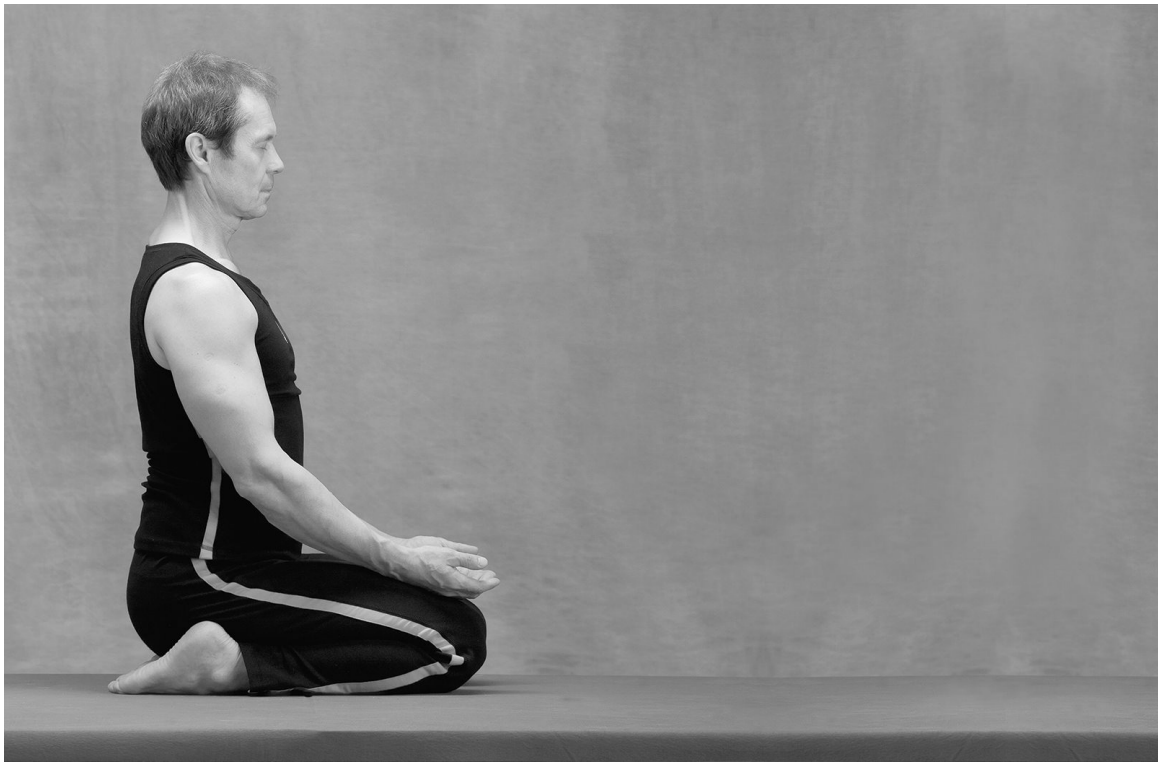
WHEN YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED

ADVICE FROM JERZY GREGOREK



Jerzy Gregorek, co-creator of The Happy Body, world champion weightlifter, poet, and father, shares what he does when the world is too much.

Over the past half of my life,

I've read hundreds of poetry books. Whenever I read a poem that I loved or felt a deep connection to, I added it to a collection I titled "200 Antidepressant Poems."

Now, whenever I feel overwhelmed or feel I did something wrong, I go to the meditation room, randomly open my manuscript, then read a poem loudly.

Usually two poems are enough to make me feel better and restore love in my heart.

Here are my 11 favorite poems to read when I am feeling depressed. *(11 is the master power number)*

THE FISH

ELIZABETH BISHOP

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood,
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face,
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike,
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth.
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away.

THE FISH

(CONTINUED BELOW)

Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

LEAVING ONE

RALPH ANGEL

I don't want any numbers.
I'm worn out beforehand.
I don't care about
who's sleeping with whom.
I only know what people don't tell me,
how it's difficult to be a human being,
that the complication begins inside
the way loneliness can't be
located in any one part of the body,
that it rises to the surface
where the soul should be
and rears its ugly head
in the face of anything tender,
those fingers of yours, those knees.

You sit beside me at the window.
We are not drinking the coffee,
we don't eat the toast.
Outside, in the park, two huge maples
are ablaze with Indian summer,
and absolutely still.
People parade the sidewalks, rush
against one another at crossings.
No one needs to understand anything
to get the goods on everyone.
It's the way of morning,
a malicious, well-trained avoidance.

My staying here
would not protect you, these fingers
of yours, the soul in your shy eyes,
I'd simply go down trying.

We, right here, belong to us.
But I'm calling the shots now,
and now I'm leaving this hotel.
With all we've lost already
our pores are wide open.
And it's cold out there.
Come drive with me.

A CAT IN AN EMPTY APARTMENT

WISLAWA SZYMBORSKA

Die—you can't do that to a cat.
Since what can a cat do
in an empty apartment?
Climb the walls?
Rub up against the furniture?
Nothing seems different here
but nothing is the same.
Nothing's been moved
but there's more space.
And at nighttime no lamps are lit.

Footsteps on the staircase,
but they're new ones.
The hand that puts fish on the saucer
has changed, too.

Something doesn't start
at its usual time.
Something doesn't happen
as it should.
Someone was always, always here,
then suddenly disappeared
and stubbornly stays disappeared.

Every closet's been examined.
Every shelf has been explored.
Excavations under the carpet turned
up nothing.
A commandment was even broken:
papers scattered everywhere.
What remains to be done.
Just sleep and wait.

Just wait till he turns up,
just let him show his face.
Will he ever get a lesson
on what not to do to a cat.
Sidle toward him
as if unwilling
and ever so slow
on visibly offended paws,
and no leaps or squeals at least to
start.

APPLES

DEBORAH DIGGES

FOR MY FATHER

Everyone brings flowers
and I bring apples sent from Milton,
Josephus, Hesperides, three
red, one gold, like a flower.

It is the evening of his eleven labor,
the prophets gathering at his bedside.

Everyone brings flowers but I bring apples,
place one in his palm
and close his fingers around the seasons
like faces, ballast,

three red, one golden.
Who knows which he'll recognize,

what phantom feature, son
or daughter calling
past dark from the orchard trees.

I bring down apples burning, burning yellow
in the white room.

Even the windows is nothing to these three
red, on golden, like a fire
we warm our hands over,

our hands over his hands
in this small camp above the city, everyone
with flowers.
I have brought apples,
three red, one golden, like flower.

MICHIKO NOGAMI

JACK GILBERT

Is she more apparent because she is not
anymore forever? Is her whiteness more white
because she was the color of pale honey?
A smokestack making the sky more visible.
A dead woman filling the whole world. Michiko
said, “The roses you gave me kept me awake
with the sound of their petals falling.”

EATING ALONE

LI-YOUNG LEE

I've pulled the last of the year's young onions.
The garden is bare now. The ground is cold,
brown and old. What is left of the day flames
in the maples at the corner of my
eye. I turn, a cardinal vanishes.
By the cellar door, I wash the onions,
then drink from the icy metal spigot.

Once, years back, I walked beside my father
among the windfall pears. I can't recall
our words. We may have strolled in silence. But
I still see him bend that way-left hand braced
on knee, creaky-to lift and hold to my
eye a rotten pear. In it, a hornet
spun crazily, glazed in slow, glistening juice.

It was my father I saw this morning
waving to me from the trees. I almost
called to him, until I came close enough
to see the shovel, leaning where I had
left it, in the flickering, deep green shade.

White rice steaming, almost done. Sweet green peas
fried in onions. Shrimp braised in sesame
oil and garlic. And my own loneliness.
What more could I, a young man, want.

THE POTTER

PETER LEVITT

The potter,

innocent of all

he makes

how could he know

his bowl would hold the moon?

BLACK DOG, RED DOG

STEPHEN DOBYNS

EXCERPT FROM BLACK DOG, RED DOG (1984)

The boy waits on the top step, hand on the door
to the screen porch. A green bike lies in the grass,
saddlebags stuffed with folded newspapers. The street
is lined with maples in full green of summer, white houses
set back from the road. The man whom the boy has come
to collect from shuffles onto the porch. As is his custom,
he wears a gray dress with flowers. Lon gray hair
covers his shoulders, catches in a week's growth of beard.
The boy opens the door and glancing down sees yellow
streaks of urine running down the man's legs, snaking
into the gray socks and loafers. For a year, the boy
has delivered the man's papers, mowed and raked his lawn.
He's even was inside the house which stinks of excrement
and garbage, with forgotten bags of groceries an tables:
rotten fruit, moldy bread, packages of unopened hamburger.
He would wait in the hall as the man counted out pennies
from a paper bag, adding five extra out of kindness.
The boy thinks of when the man's mother was alive.
He would sneak up to the house when the music began
and watch the man and his mother dance cheek to cheek
around the kitchen, slowly, hesitantly, as if each
thought the other could break as easily as a china plate.
The mother had been dead a week when a neighbor found her
and even then her son wouldn't let her go. The boy sat
on the curb watching the man hurl his fat body against
the immaculate state troopers who tried not to touch him
but only keep him from where men from funeral home
carried out his mother wrapped in red blankets, smelling
like hamburger left for weeks on the umbrella stand.

BLACK DOG, RED DOG

(CONTINUED BELOW)

Today as the boy waits on the top step watching the urine
trickle into the man's socks, he raises his head to see
the pale blue eyes fixed upon him with their wrinkles and
bags and zigzagging red lines. As he stares into them,
he begins to believe he is staring out of those eye,
looking down on the thin blond boy on his front steps.
Then he lifts his head and still through the man's eyes
he sees the softness of late afternoon light on the street
where the man has spent his entire life, sees the green
of summer, white Victorian houses as through a white fog
so they shimmer and flicker before him. Looking past
the houses, past the first fields, he sees the reddening
sky of sunset, sees the land rushing west as if wanted
to smash itself as completely as a cup thrown to the floor,
violently pursuing the sky with great spirals of red wind.

Abruptly the boy steps back. When he looks again into
the man's eyes, they appear bottomless and sad; and he
he wants to touch his arm, say he's sorry about his mother,
sorry he's crazy, sorry he lets urine run down his leg
and wears a dress. Instead, he gives him his paper
and leaves. As he raises his bike, he looks put toward
red sky and darkening earth, and they seem poised
like two animals that have always hated each other,
each fiercely wanting to tear out the other's throat:
black dog, red dog—now more despising, more resolved.

THE WORD

MARK COX

I get in between the covers as quietly as I can.
Her hand is on my pillow and I put my face as close
as I can without waking her up. We made salad yesterday
and her fingertips still smell of green pepper and onions.
I feel homey, almost safe, breathing this, remembering
the way we washed the vegetables under cold water, peeled,
then sliced them with the harmless little knife her sister
gave us for Christmas. I feel childish and gently pull
the blanket over my head, barely youching my lips
to the short, ragged fingernails she chews while talking
to her mother on the phone. These days there's so much bad news
from home. Old people who keep living and living awfully,
babies who stop breathing for no reason at all.
I am so close to her that if I were to speak one word
silently, she would feel it and toss the covers to one side,
and for this reason I'll say nothing as long as I can.
Let the sheet stiffen above us, I have nothing to say.
Not about their lives or my own life.
Not about the branches so weighted with snow
they don't brush our window anymore.
Not about the fact that the only way I can touch anymore
at all, the only way I can speak, is by trying not to.
"What's left, what's left, what's left," my dog breathes
in his sleep. Lately I snore badly in a language
only he understands. I've been trying so hard to teach,
I've been trying so hard to switch bodies
with ythe young people in my classes that last week, when the dog
woke me and wanted to go out, I took his face in my hands
and told him not to be afraid. "You know so much already," I said.
"You are talented and young, you have something to give people,

THE WORD

(CONTINUED BELOW)

I wouldn't lie to you."
Rita told this story as we sat around the salad with friends,
repeating again and again how the dog closed his eyes and basked.
Sleep is also the only place I can type with more than three
fingers, I said. But I thought, it's true, all this,
I speak best and most fully in my sleep. When my heart
is not wrapped in layer after layer of daylight, not prepared
like some fighter's taped fist.
She sleeps, her hand next to my mouth, the number
for the 24-hour bank machine fading on its palm.
The word starts briefly from between my lips, then turns back.
The word sifts deeper into what my life is.

DEATH

MAURYCY SZYMEL

I got used to warm sheets,
to a woman, black coffee, and to vodka.
I fell in love with my snow, covered hut,
and hunger, satiety, and soft songs.

I wouldn't be able to live without a cigarette
and I would die without a view of this clouded sky,
without a handkerchief
or flowers pleasing to my eye.

A cemetery at midnight horrifies me,
and the unfeeling table I write this poem on,
and your passionate, autumn eyes
through which death peers.

But when I lay my forehead against the wall,
it smells of your neck, lips, your hair,
and hay,
and water green with frogs and stars.

So I caress the table, windows, lampshade,
like your warm breasts in the dark ripened by night.
And when we nestle face to face,
I understand that there is no death.

translated from the original Polish by Jerzy and Aniela Gregorek

TO

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ

Żebym wreszcie mógł powiedzieć, co siedzi we mnie.
Wykrzyknąć: ludzie, okłamywałem was
Mówiąc, że tego we mnie nie ma,
Kiedy TO jest tam cięgle, we dnie i w nocy.
Chociaż właśnie dzięki temu
Umiałem opisywać wasze łatwopalne miasta,
Wasze krótkie miłości i zabawy rozpadające się w próchno,
Kolczyki, lustra, zsuwające się ramiączko,
Sceny w sypialniach i na pobojowiskach.
Pisanie było dla mnie ochronną strategią
Zacierania śladów. Bo nie może podobać się ludziom
Ten, kto sięga po zabronione.

Przywołuję na pomoc rzeki, w których pływałem, jeziora
Z kładką między sitowiem, dolinę,
W której echu pieśni wtórzy wieczorne światło,
I wyznaję, że moje ekstatyczne pochwały istnienia
Mogły być tylko ćwiczeniami wysokiego stylu,
A pod spodem było TO, czego nie podejmuję się nazwać.

TO jest podobne do myśli bezdomnego, kiedy idzie po mroźnym, obcym mieście.

I podobne do chwili, kiedy osaczony Żyd widzi zbliżające się ciężkie kaski niemieckich żandarmów.

TO jest jak kiedy syn króla wybiera się na miasto i widzi świat prawdziwy: nędzę, chorobę, starzenie się i śmierć.

TO może też być porównane do nieruchomej twarzy kogoś, kto poją, że został opuszczony na zawsze.

TO

(CONTINUED BELOW)

Albo do słów lekarza o nie dającym się odwrócić wyroku.

Ponieważ TO oznacza natknięcie się na kamienny mur,
i zrozumienie, że ten mur nie ustąpi żadnym naszym błaganiom.