Cockroaches: Ars Poetica by Chad Davidson \*\*Please prepare presentations in groups for jigsaw.\*\*

They know that death is merely of the body

not the species, know that their putrid chitin

is always memorable. We call them ugly

with their blackened exoskeletons,

their wall-crawlings as we paw at them.

Extreme adaptability, we say.

And where there’s one there’s probably a million

more who lie and laugh in cracks close by.

At first they seem so pitiful and base

feeding on what we leave behind. Content

to watch us watching them, their hidden grace

is endless procreation: it keeps them constant,

believing they’ll live to read our requiem

with the godlike eyes we used to look at them.

Insomnia by Alicia Suskin Ostriker, 2009

But it’s really fear you want to talk about

and cannot find the words

so you jeer at yourself

you call yourself a coward

you wake at 2 a.m. thinking failure,

fool, unable to sleep, unable to sleep

buzzing away on your mattress with two pillows

and a quilt, they call them comforters,

which implies that comfort can be bought

and paid for, to help with the fear, the failure

your two walnut chests of drawers snicker, the bookshelves mourn

the art on the walls pities you, the man himself beside you

asleep smelling like mushrooms and moss is a comfort

but never enough, never, the ceiling fixture lightless

velvet drapes hiding the window

traffic noise like a vicious animal

on the loose somewhere out there—

you brag to friends you won’t mind death only dying

what a liar you are—

all the other fears, of rejection, of physical pain,

of losing your mind, of losing your eyes,

they are all part of this!

Pawprints of this! Hair snarls in your comb

this glowing clock the single light in the room

Fishing on the Susquehanna in July

by Billy Collins

I have never been fishing on the Susquehanna

or on any river for that matter

to be perfectly honest.

Not in July or any month

have I had the pleasure--if it is a pleasure--

of fishing on the Susquehanna.

I am more likely to be found

in a quiet room like this one--

a painting of a woman on the wall,

a bowl of tangerines on the table--

trying to manufacture the sensation

of fishing on the Susquehanna.

There is little doubt

that others have been fishing

on the Susquehanna,

rowing upstream in a wooden boat,

sliding the oars under the water

then raising them to drip in the light.

But the nearest I have ever come to

fishing on the Susquehanna

was one afternoon in a museum in Philadelphia

when I balanced a little egg of time

in front of a painting

in which that river curled around a bend

under a blue cloud-ruffled sky,

dense trees along the banks,

and a fellow with a red bandanna

sitting in a small, green

flat-bottom boat

holding the thin whip of a pole.

That is something I am unlikely

ever to do, I remember

saying to myself and the person next to me.

Then I blinked and moved on

to other American scenes

of haystacks, water whitening over rocks,

even one of a brown hare

who seemed so wired with alertness

I imagined him springing right out of the frame.

Digging

BY SEAMUS HEANEY

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft

Against the inside knee was levered firmly.

He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep

To scatter new potatoes that we picked,

Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.

Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day

Than any other man on Toner’s bog.

Once I carried him milk in a bottle

Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up

To drink it, then fell to right away

Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods

Over his shoulder, going down and down

For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap

Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge

Through living roots awaken in my head.

But I’ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests.

I’ll dig with it.

Morning in the Burned House

By Margaret Atwood

In the burned house I am eating breakfast.

You understand: there is no house, there is no breakfast,

yet here I am.

The spoon which was melted scrapes against

the bowl which was melted also.

No one else is around.

Where have they gone to, brother and sister,

mother and father? Off along the shore,

perhaps. Their clothes are still on the hangers,

their dishes piled beside the sink,

which is beside the woodstove

with its grate and sooty kettle,

every detail clear,

tin cup and rippled mirror.

The day is bright and songless,

the lake is blue, the forest watchful.

In the east a bank of cloud

rises up silently like dark bread.

I can see the swirls in the oilcloth,

I can see the flaws in the glass,

those flares where the sun hits them.

I can’t see my own arms and legs

or know if this is a trap or blessing,

finding myself back here, where everything

in this house has long been over,

kettle and mirror, spoon and bowl,

including my own body,

including the body I had then,

including the body I have now

as I sit at this morning table, alone and happy,

bare child’s feet on the scorched floorboards

(I can almost see)

in my burning clothes, the thin green shorts

and grubby yellow T-shirt

holding my cindery, non-existent,

radiant flesh. Incandescent.

Mr. Pate’s Barbershop

By Major Jackson

I remember the room in which he held

a blade to my neck & scraped the dark

hairs foresting a jawline: stacks of Ebonys

& Jets, clippings of black boxers—

Joe Frazier, Jimmy Young, Jack Johnson—

the color television bolted to

a ceiling like the one I watched all night

in a waiting room at St. Joseph’s

while my cousin recovered from gunshots.

I remember the old Coke machine, a water

fountain by the door, how I drank

the summer of ’88 over & over from a paper

cone cup & still could not quench my thirst,

for this was the year funeral homes boomed,

the year Mr. Pate swept his own shop

for he had lost his best little helper Squeaky

to cross fire. He suffered like most barbers

suffered, quietly, his clippers humming so loud

he forgot Ali’s lightning left jab, his love

for angles, for carpentry, for baseball. He forgot

everything & would never be the same.

I remember the way the blade gleamed

fierce in the fading light of dusk & a reflection

of myself panned inside the razor’s edge

wondering if I could lay down my pen, close up

my ledgers & my journals, if I could undo

my tie & take up barbering where

months on end a child’s head would darken

at my feet & bring with it the uncertainty

of tomorrow, or like Mr. Pate gathering

clumps of fallen hair, at the end of a day,

in short, delicate whisks as though

they were the fine findings of gold dust

he’d deposit in a jar & place on a shelf, only

to return Saturdays, collecting, as an antique dealer

collects, growing tired, but never forgetting

someone has to cherish these tiny little heads.