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## Poetry

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### AUDIENCE\*

When I take the time to read slowly, the words sink in.  
If I hadn't rushed my reading of *Anna Karenina*  
The first time through, focusing on plot, not nuance,  
I might have been able to say why Karenin,  
On the night he discovers his wife loves Vronsky,  
Gives her a cool lecture on the proprieties  
And hides what he feels, how the bridge of his life  
Has suddenly fallen way beneath him.  
Why does a man who's tumbling into the void  
Want to tumble in silence, without a cry?

Now as I drive to visit a friend in the country,  
Listening as the story is slowly spoken on tape  
By an actress with all the time in the world,  
It's clear to me the invisible beings  
Karenin imagines watching him from their balcony  
Would be embarrassed by any display of feeling.

As to why he's chosen for himself an audience  
That judges on the basis of a cool appearance,  
Good form, good show, and neglects the soul,  
That must be what it means to live in St. Petersburg,  
City of courtiers and court ambitions,  
And not in Moscow, its country cousin,  
Noisy with laughing and crying families.

I'm glad the friend I'm driving to visit  
Lives hours away in a country village,  
A tolerant woman who won't reproach me  
For driving slowly, who'll be glad to learn  
I'm taking my own sweet time for reflection.  
It's a shame no one enlightened steps forward  
To tell Karenin he's a character in a novel  
Where no one's commended for preserving his dignity,  
Only for shouting and weeping and tearing his hair,  
For throwing a book of philosophy out the window.

It looks like I'm one of the fortunate few  
 With leisure enough to ask myself  
 If all the invisible beings watching my life  
 Hail from Moscow. And I'll have time this evening  
 To ask my friend her honest opinion  
 And to weigh her answer.  
 And then it's time to ask if the life she's living  
 Pleases the beings she imagines watching  
 And whether they watch from duty or sympathy.

Life would be easier, I'll say, if our audience  
 Were a single person, like Dante's Beatrice.  
 Just the thought of her silently looking on  
 From across a stream was enough to brighten a path  
 Otherwise forlorn. But how can Dante be sure,  
 My friend will ask me, that he knows her wishes?  
 What if they don't all show in her face, or only show  
 As if veiled by mist, and he sees them darkly?

Carl Dennis, *Practical Gods* (2001)

*\*Reprinted with permission of the poet, Carl Dennis.  
 Practical Gods is published by Penguin Books (2002).*

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## TVMen: Tolstoy\*

### I. CHAMBRE

A curiously tender man and yet  
 even after their marriage he  
 called his desire to kiss her  
 "the appearance of Satan."

*Her in right profile against the light, all the music in the room streams  
 toward the blue frosty window.*

Desire, the trees are rags. Desire, streaks of it  
 scalding the fog. This is not what I meant (Lev thinks wildly) –  
 words from a bad play, embraces that knock the lamp,  
*you are so young!* And this fog.

*His bedroom on a March morning as cool as pearls, close-up on rustling,  
 coats or shawls.*