

Poetry

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A Selection of Poems from Different Historical Periods

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1. Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), "Sonnet V," from *Astrophil and Stella*

It is most true that eyes are formed to serve
The inward light, and that the heavenly part
Ought to be King, from whose rules who do swerve,
Rebels to nature, strive for their own smart.
It is most true, what we call Cupids dart
An image is, which for ourselves we carve,
And, fools, adore in temple of our hart,
Till that good god make church and churchmen starve.
True, that true beauty virtue is indeed,
Whereof this beauty can be but a shade,
Which, elements with mortal mixture breed.
True, that on earth we are but pilgrims made,
And should in soul up to our country moue:
True, and yet true that I must Stella love.

Reference

Listen to the poem:
[http://www.luminarium.org/
renlit/stella5.htm](http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/stella5.htm)

2. John Donne (1572-1631), “The Sun Rising”

BUSY old fool, unruly Sun,
 Why dost thou thus,
 Through windows, and through curtains, call on us ?
 Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run ?
 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
 Late school-boys and sour prentices,
 Go tell court-huntsmen that the king will ride,
 Call country ants to harvest offices ;
 Love, all alike, no season knows nor clime,
 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams so reverend, and strong
 Why shouldst thou think ?
 I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
 But that I would not lose her sight so long.
 If her eyes have not blinded thine,
 Look, and to-morrow late tell me,
 Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine
 Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me.
 Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
 And thou shalt hear, “All here in one bed lay.”

She's all states, and all princes I ;
 Nothing else is ;
 Princes do but play us ; compared to this,
 All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy.
 Thou, Sun, art half as happy as we,
 In that the world's contracted thus ;
 Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
 To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
 Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere ;
 This bed thy center is, these walls thy sphere.

Reference

Listen to the poem:
<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/sunrising.htm>

3. John Milton (1608-1674), 745-794, Book VIII, *Paradise Lost*

[Eve decides to eat the forbidden fruit]

Great are thy Virtues, doubtless, best of Fruits,
Though kept from Man, & worthy to be admired,
Whose taste, too long forborne, at first assay
Gave elocution to the mute, and taught
The Tongue not made for Speech to speak thy praise:
Thy praise he also who forbids thy use,
Conceals not from us, naming thee the Tree
Of Knowledge, knowledge both of good and evil;
Forbids us then to taste, but his forbidding
Commends thee more, while it infers the good
By thee communicated, and our want:
For good unknown, sure is not had, or had
And yet unknown, is as not had at all.
In plain then, what forbids he but to know,
Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?
Such prohibitions bind not. But if Death
Bind us with after-bands, what profits then
Our inward freedom? In the day we eat
Of this fair Fruit, our doom is, we shall die.
How dies the Serpent? he hath eaten and lives,
And knows, and speaks, and reasons, and discerns,
Irrational till then. For us alone
Was death invented? or to us denied
This intellectual food, for beasts reserved?
For Beasts it seems: yet that one Beast which first
Hath tasted, envies not, but brings with joy
The good befallen him, Author unsuspected,
Friendly to man, far from deceit or guile.
What fear I then, rather what know to fear
Under this ignorance of Good and Evil,
Of God or Death, of Law or Penalty?
Here grows the Cure of all, this Fruit Divine,
Fair to the Eye, inviting to the Taste,
Of virtue to make wise: what hinders then
To reach, and feed at once both Body and Mind?
So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
Forth reaching to the Fruit, she plucked, she eat:
Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat

Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe,
That all was lost. Back to the Thicket slunk
The guilty Serpent, and well might, for EVE
Intent now wholly on her taste, naught else
Regarded, such delight till then, as seemed,
In Fruit she never tasted, whether true
Or fancied so, through expectation high
Of knowledge, nor was God-head from her thought.
Greedily she engorged without restraint,
And knew not eating Death: Satiated at length,
And hightened as with Wine, jocund and boon,
Thus to her self she pleasingly began.

4. Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), "The Mower's Song"

I.

My mind was once the true survey
Of all these meadows fresh and gay,
And in the greenness of the grass
Did see its hopes as in a glass ;
When JULIANA came, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

II.

But these, while I with sorrow pine,
Grew more luxuriant still and fine,
That not one blade of grass you spied,
But had a flower on either side ;
When JULIANA came, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

III.

Unthankful meadows, could you so
A fellowship so true forego,
And in your gaudy May-games meet,
While I lay trodden under feet?
When JULIANA came, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me?

IV.

But what you in compassion ought,
Shall now by my revenge be wrought ;
And flowers, and grass, and I, and all,
Will in one common ruin fall ;
For JULIANA comes, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

V.

And thus, ye meadows, which have been
Companions of my thoughts more green,
Shall now the heraldry become
With which I shall adorn my tomb ;
For JULIANA came, and she,
What I do to the grass, does to my thoughts and me.

5. William Wordsworth (1770-1850), “Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3 1802”

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Reference

Listen to the poem:
[http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=7jOzPpNivYg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jOzPpNivYg)

6. Percy B. Shelley (1792-1822), “Stanzas Written in Dejection near Naples”

The sun is warm, the sky is clear,
The waves are dancing fast and bright,
Blue isles and snowy mountains wear
The purple noon's transparent light:
The breath of the moist earth is light
Around its unexpanded buds;
Like many a voice of one delight –
The winds', the birds', the ocean-floods' –
The City's voice itself is soft like Solitude's.

I see the Deep's untrampled floor
With green and purple sea-weeds strown;
I see the waves upon the shore
Like light dissolved in star-showers thrown:
I sit upon the sands alone;
The lightning of the noon-tide ocean
Is flashing round me, and a tone
Arises from its measured motion –
How sweet! did any heart now share in my emotion.

Alas! I have nor hope nor health,
Nor peace within nor calm around,
Nor that Content, surpassing wealth,
The sage in meditation found,
And walk'd with inward glory crown'd –
Nor fame, nor power, nor love, nor leisure;
Others I see whom these surround –
Smiling they live, and call life pleasure;
To me that cup has been dealt in another measure.

Yet now despair itself is mild
Even as the winds and waters are;
I could lie down like a tired child,
And weep away the life of care
Which I have borne, and yet must bear,
Till death like sleep might steal on me,
And I might feel in the warm air
My cheek grow cold, and hear the sea
Breathe o'er my dying brain its last monotony.

7. Elizabeth Barrett-Browning (1806-1841), “How Do I Love You? Let me Count the Ways” from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, XLIII

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, –I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! –and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

8. Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), "Echo"

Come to me in the silence of the night;
 Come in the speaking silence of a dream;
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright
 As sunlight on a stream;
 Come back in tears,
O memory, hope and love of finished years.
O dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter-sweet,
 Whose wakening should have been in Paradise,
Where souls brim-full of love abide and meet;
 Where thirsting longing eyes
 Watch the slow door
That opening, letting in, lets out no more.
Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live
 My very life again though cold in death;
Come back to me in dreams, that I may give
 Pulse for pulse, breath for breath:
 Speak low, lean low,
As long ago, my love, how long ago.

9. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), “On the Departure Platform”

We kissed at the barrier; and passing through
She left me, and moment by moment got
Smaller and smaller, until to my view
She was but a spot;

A wee white spot of muslin fluff
That down the diminishing platform bore
Through hustling crowds of gentle and rough
To the carriage door.

Under the lamplight’s fitful glowers,
Behind dark groups from far and near,
Whose interests were apart from ours,
She would disappear,

Then show again, till I ceased to see
That flexible form, that nebulous white;
And she who was more than my life to me
Had vanished quite...

We have penned new plans since that fair fond day,
And in season she will appear again –
Perhaps in the same soft array –
But never as then!

– And ‘why, young man, must eternally fly
A joy you’ll repeat, if you love her well?
– O friend, nought happens twice thus; why,
I cannot tell!

10. W.B. Yeats (1865-1936), “The Second Coming”

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.
Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Reference

Listen to the poem:
[http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=NrLiT11Uis](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrLiT11Uis)

11. Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), “Dulce et Decorum”

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

GAS! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime. –
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Bitter as cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Reference

See, among other versions:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4Lzo_EXXOQ&feature=related

12. W.H. Auden (1907-1973), “Stop all the Clocks”

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crêpe bows round the white necks of the
Public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing can ever come to any good.

Reference

From the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, read by John Hannah with a Scottish accent,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_a-eXIoyYA

13. Dylan Thomas (1914-1953), “Do not Go Gentle into that Good Night”

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words have forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Reference

Listen to the poem, read by Richard Burton:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxDgYMwXrIk&feature=related>

14. Philip Larkin (1922-1985), "High Windows"

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives -
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,
And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
The sun-comprehending glass,
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

15. Ted Hughes (1930-1998), “Hawk Roosting”

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward from my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Reference

See the poet:
[http://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=18DdjO9Ig-s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18DdjO9Ig-s)

16. Jenny Joseph (1932-), "Warning"

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me,
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

17. Craig Raine (1944-), “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home”

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings
and some are treasured for their markings –

they cause the eyes to melt
or the body to shriek without pain.

I have never seen one fly, but
sometimes they perch on the hand.

Mist is when the sky is tired of flight
and rests its soft machine on ground:

then the world is dim and bookish
like engravings under tissue paper.

Rain is when the earth is television.
It has the property of making colours darker.

Model T is a room with the lock inside –
a key is turned to free the world

for movement, so quick there is a film
to watch for anything missed.

But time is tied to the wrist
or kept in a box, ticking with impatience.

In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,
that snores when you pick it up.

If the ghost cries, they carry it
to their lips and soothe it to sleep

with sounds. And yet they wake it up
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.

Only the young are allowed to suffer
openly. Adults go to a punishment room

with water but nothing to eat.

Reference

Listen to the poem:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d35UEu8bzQU>
See the poem at
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecSaK0phjzQ&feature=related>

They lock the door and suffer the noises

alone. No one is exempt
and everyone's pain has a different smell.

At night when all the colours die,
they hide in pairs

and read about themselves –
in colour, with their eyelids shut.

18. John Agard (1949-), "Half-caste"

Excuse me
 standing on one leg
 I'm half-caste

Explain yuself
 wha yu mean
 when yu say half-caste
 yu mean when picasso
 mix red an green
 is a half-caste canvas/
 explain yuself
 wha u mean
 when yu say half-caste
 yu mean when light an shadow
 mix in de sky
 is a half-caste weather/
 well in dat case
 england weather
 nearly always half-caste
 in fact some o dem cloud
 half-caste till dem overcast
 so spiteful dem dont want de sun pass
 ah rass/
 explain yuself
 wha yu mean
 when yu say half-caste
 yu mean tchaikovsky
 sit down at dah piano
 an mix a black key
 wid a white key
 is a half-caste symphony/

Explain yuself
 wha yu mean
 Ah listening to yu wid de keen
 half of mih ear
 Ah looking at u wid de keen
 half of mih eye
 and when I'm introduced to yu
 I'm sure you'll understand
 why I offer yu half-a-hand

Reference

Listen to the poet read his poem:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eJSEfA63_k&feature=related

an when I sleep at night
I close half-a-eye
consequently when I dream
I dream half-a-dream
an when moon begin to glow
I half-caste human being
cast half-a-shadow
but yu come back tomorrow
wid de whole of yu eye
an de whole of yu ear
and de whole of yu mind

an I will tell yu
de other half
of my story

19. Jackie Kay (1961-), “Brendon Gallacher (for my Brother Maxie)”

He was seven and I was six, my Brendon Gallacher.
He was Irish and I was Scottish, my Brendon Gallacher.
His father was in prison; he was a cat burglar.
My father was a communist party full-time worker.
He had six brothers, and I had one, my Brendon Gallacher.

En would hold my hand and take me by the river
Where we'd talk all about his family being poor.
He'd get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.
A wee holiday someplace nice. Some place far.
I'd tell my mum about my Brendon Gallacher

How his mum drank and his daddy was a cat burglar.
And she'd say, 'why not have him round to dinner?'
No, no, I'd say he's got big holes in his trousers.
I like meeting him by the burn in the open air.
Then one day after we'd been friends two years,

One day when it was pouring and I was indoors,
My mum says to me, 'I was talking to Mrs Moir
Who lives next door to your Brendon Gallacher
Didn't you say his address was 24 Novar?
She says there are no Gallachers at 24 Novar

There never have been any Gallachers next door.'
And he died then, my Brendon Gallacher,
Flat out on my bedroom floor, his spiky hair,
His impish grin, his funny flapping ear.
Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher

Reference

Listen to the author reading
her poem:
[http://www.poetryarchive.org/
poetryarchive/singlePoem.do
?poemId=5683](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoem.do?poemId=5683)

20. Grace Nichols (1950-): “Hurricane Hits England”

It took a hurricane, to bring her closer
To the landscape
Half the night she lay awake,
The howling ship of the wind
Its gathering rage,
Like some dark ancestral spectre,
Fearful and reassuring:

Talk to me Huracan
Talk to me
Oya
Talk to me
Shango
And Hattie,
My sweeping, back-home cousin.

Tell me why you visit.
An English coast?
What is the meaning
Of old tongues
Reaping havoc
In new places?
The blinding illumination,
Even as you short-
Circuit us
Into further darkness?
What is the meaning of trees
Falling heavy as whales
Their crusted roots
Their cratered graves?
O Why is my heart unchained?
Tropical Oya of the Weather,
I am aligning myself to you,
I am following the movement of your winds,
I am riding the mystery of your storm.
Ah, sweet mystery;
Come to break the frozen lake in me,
Shaking the foundations of the very trees within me,
Come to let me know,
That the earth is the earth is the earth.

Reference

Listen to the author reading her poem:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qsa_QAFMs5o
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english/poemscult/hurricanerev2.shtml>