This World

Mary Oliver

I would like to write a poem about the world that has in it

nothing fancy.

But it seems impossible.

Whatever the subject, the morning sun

glimmers it.

The tulip feels the heat and flaps its petals open and becomes a star.

The ants bore into the peony bud and there is a dark

pinprick well of sweetness.

As for the stones on the beach, forget it.

Each one could be set in gold.

So I tried with my eyes shut, but of course the birds

were singing.

And the aspen trees were shaking the sweetest music out of their leaves.

And that was followed by, guess what, a momentous and

beautiful silence

as comes to all of us, in little earfuls, if we’re not too

hurried to hear it.

As for spiders, how the dew hangs in their webs

even if they say nothing, or seem to say nothing.

So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe they sing.

So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe the stars sing too,

and the ants, and the peonies, and the warm stones,

so happy to be where they are, on the beach, instead of being

locked up in gold.

When in Rome

Mari Evans

Mattie dear

the box is full

take

whatever you like

to eat

(an egg

or soup

…there ain’t no meat.)

there’s endive there

and

cottage cheese

(whew! If I had some

black-eyed peas…)

there’s sardines

on the shelves

and such

but

don’t

get my anchovies

they cost

too much!

(me get the

anchovies indeed!

what she think, she got—

a bird to feed?)

there’s plenty in there

to fill you up.

(yes’m. just the

sight’s

enough!

Hope I lives till I get

home

I’m tired of eatin’

what they eats in Rome…)

Singapore

Mary Oliver

In Singapore, in the airport,

a darknes was ripped from my eyes.

In the women’s restroom, one compartment stood open.

A woman knelt there, washing something

in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach

and I felt, in my pocket, for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.

Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.

Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.

A waterfall, or if that’s not possible, a fountain

rising and falling.

A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.

Her beauty and embarrassment struggled together, and

neither could win.

She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this?

Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,

which is dull enough.

She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as

hubcaps, with a blue rag.

Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.

She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.

Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don’t doubt for a moment that she loves her life.

And I want her to rise up from the crust and slop

and fly down to the river.

This probably won’t happen.

But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?

Of course, it isn’t.

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only

the light that can shine out of a life. I mean

the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,

the way her smile was only for my sake; I mean

the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.

Sonnenizio on a Line from Drayton

Kim Addonizio

Since there’s no help, come let us kiss and part;

or kiss anyway, let’s start with that, with the kissing part,

because it’s better than the parting part, isn’t it—

we’re good at kissing, we like how that part goes:

we part our lips, our mouths get near and nearer,

then we’re close, my breasts, your chest, our bodies partway

to making love, so we might as well, part of me thinks—

the wrong part, I know, the bad part, but still

let’s pretend we’re at that party where we met

and scandalized everyone, remember that part? Hold me

like that again, unbutton my shirt, part of you

wants to I can tell, I’m touching that part and its ways

*yes*, the ardent partisan, let it win you over,

it’s hopeless, come, we’ll kiss and part forever.

The Golden Years

Billy Collins

All I do these drawn-out days

is sit in my kitchen at Pheasant Ridge

where there are no pheasants to be seen

and last time I looked, no ridge.

I could drive over to Quail Falls

and spend the day there playing bridge,

but the lack of a falls and the absence of quail

would only remind me of Pheasant Ridge.

I know a widow at Fox Run

and another with a condo at Smokey Ledge.

One of them smokes, and neither can run,

so I’ll stick to the pledge I made to Midge.

Who frightened the fox and bulldozed the ledge?

I ask in my kitchen at Pheasant Ridge.

The Black Snake

Mary Oliver

When the black snake

flashed onto the morning road,

and the truck could not swerve—

*death*, that is how it happens.

Now he lies looped and useless

as an old bicycle tire.

I stop the car

and carry him into the bushes.

He is as cool and gleaming

as a braided whip, he is as beautiful and quiet

as a dead brother.

I leave him under the leaves

and drive on, thinking

about *death*, its suddenness,

its terrible weight,

its certain coming. Yet under

reason burns a brighter fire, which the bones

have always preferred.

It is the story of endless good fortune.

It says to oblivion: not me!

It is the light at the center of every cell.

It is what sent the snake coiling and flowing forward

happily all spring through the green leaves before

he came to the road.

Africa

Maya Angelou

Thus she had lain   
sugercane sweet   
deserts her hair   
golden her feet   
mountains her breasts   
two Niles her tears.   
Thus she has lain   
Black through the years.

Over the white seas   
rime white and cold   
brigands ungentled   
icicle bold   
took her young daughters   
sold her strong sons   
churched her with Jesus   
bled her with guns.   
Thus she has lain.

Now she is rising   
remember her pain   
remember the losses   
her screams loud and vain   
remember her riches   
her history slain   
now she is striding   
although she has lain.

Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins

I ask them to take a poem

and hold it up to the light

like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem

and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem’s room

and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski

across the surface of a poem

waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do

is tie the poem to a chair with rope

and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose

to find out what it really means.

On Reading Poems To A Senior Class At South High

D.C. Berry

Before   
I opened my mouth   
I noticed them sitting there   
as orderly as frozen fish   
in a package.   
  
Slowly water began to fill the room   
though I did not notice it   
till it reached   
my ears   
  
and then I heard the sounds   
of fish in an aquarium   
and I knew that though I had   
tried to drown them   
with my words   
that they had only opened up   
like gills for them   
and let me in.   
  
Together we swam around the room   
like thirty tails whacking words   
till the bell rang   
  
puncturing   
a hole in the door   
  
where we all leaked out   
  
They went to another class   
I suppose and I home   
  
where Queen Elizabeth   
my cat met me   
and licked my fins   
till they were hands again.

Musee des Beaux Arts

W. H. Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position: how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Siren Song

Margaret Atwood

This is the one song everyone

would like to learn: the song

that is irresistible:

the song that forces men

to leap overboard in squadrons

even though they see the beached skulls

the song nobody knows

because anyone who has heard it

is dead, and the others can't remember.

Shall I tell you the secret

and if I do, will you get me

out of this bird suit?

I don't enjoy it here

squatting on this island

looking picturesque and mythical

with these two feathery maniacs,

I don't enjoy singing

this trio, fatal and valuable.

I will tell the secret to you,

to you, only to you.

Come closer. This song

is a cry for help: Help me!

Only you, only you can,

you are unique

at last. Alas

it is a boring song

but it works every time.

My Papa’s Waltz

Theodore Roethke

The whiskey on your breath

Could make a small boy dizzy;

But I hung on like death:

Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans

Slid from the kitchen shelf;

My mother’s countenance

Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist

Was battered on one knuckle;

At every step you missed

My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head

With a palm caked hard by dirt,

Then waltzed me off to bed

Still clinging to your shirt.

Tell all the truth but tell it slant

Emily Dickinson

Tell all the truth but tell it slant —

Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased

With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind —

The Blues

Billy Collins

Much of what is said here  
must be said twice,  
a reminder that no one  
takes an immediate interest in the pain of others.  
  
Nobody will listen, it would seem,  
if you simply admit  
your baby left you early this morning  
she didn't even stop to say good-bye.  
  
But if you sing it again  
with the help of the band  
which will now lift you to a higher,  
more ardent, and beseeching key,  
  
people will not only listen,  
they will shift to the sympathetic  
edges of their chairs,  
moved to such acute anticipation  
  
by that chord and the delay that follows,  
they will not be able to sleep  
unless you release with one finger  
a scream from the throat of your guitar  
  
and turn your head back to the microphone  
to let them know  
you're a hard-hearted man  
but that woman's sure going to make you cry.

Constantly Risking Absurdity

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Constantly risking absurdity

                                             and death

            whenever he performs

                                        above the heads

                                                            of his audience

   the poet like an acrobat

                                 climbs on rime

                                          to a high wire of his own making

and balancing on eyebeams

                                     above a sea of faces

             paces his way

                               to the other side of day

    performing entrechats

                               and sleight-of-foot tricks

and other high theatrics

                               and all without mistaking

                     any thing

                               for what it may not be

       For he's the super realist

                                     who must perforce perceive

                   taut truth

                                 before the taking of each stance or step

in his supposed advance

                                  toward that still higher perch

where Beauty stands and waits

                                     with gravity

                                                to start her death-defying leap

      And he

             a little charleychaplin man

                                           who may or may not catch

               her fair eternal form

                                     spreadeagled in the empty air

                  of existence

Terence, this is stupid stuff

A.E. Housman

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ‘TERENCE, this is stupid stuff: |  |
| You eat your victuals fast enough; |  |
| There can’t be much amiss, ’tis clear, |  |
| To see the rate you drink your beer. |  |
| But oh, good Lord, the verse you make, | *5* |
| It gives a chap the belly-ache. |  |
| The cow, the old cow, she is dead; |  |
| It sleeps well, the horned head: |  |
| We poor lads, ’tis our turn now |  |
| To hear such tunes as killed the cow. | *10* |
| Pretty friendship ’tis to rhyme |  |
| Your friends to death before their time |  |
| Moping melancholy mad: |  |
| Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.’ |  |
|  |  |
| Why, if ’tis dancing you would be, | *15* |
| There’s brisker pipes than poetry. |  |
| Say, for what were hop-yards meant, |  |
| Or why was Burton built on Trent? |  |
| Oh many a peer of England brews |  |
| Livelier liquor than the Muse, | *20* |
| And malt does more than Milton can |  |
| To justify God’s ways to man. |  |
| Ale, man, ale’s the stuff to drink |  |
| For fellows whom it hurts to think: |  |
| Look into the pewter pot | *25* |
| To see the world as the world’s not. |  |
| And faith, ’tis pleasant till ’tis past: |  |
| The mischief is that ’twill not last. |  |
| Oh I have been to Ludlow fair |  |
| And left my necktie God knows where, | *30* |
| And carried half way home, or near, |  |
| Pints and quarts of Ludlow beer: |  |
| Then the world seemed none so bad, |  |
| And I myself a sterling lad; |  |
| And down in lovely muck I’ve lain, | *35* |
| Happy till I woke again. |  |
| Then I saw the morning sky: |  |
| Heigho, the tale was all a lie; |  |
| The world, it was the old world yet, |  |
| I was I, my things were wet, | *40* |
| And nothing now remained to do |  |
| But begin the game anew. |  |
|  |  |
| Therefore, since the world has still |  |
| Much good, but much less good than ill, |  |
| And while the sun and moon endure | *45* |
| Luck’s a chance, but trouble’s sure, |  |
| I’d face it as a wise man would, |  |
| And train for ill and not for good. |  |
| ’Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale |  |
| Is not so brisk a brew as ale: | *50* |
| Out of a stem that scored the hand |  |
| I wrung it in a weary land. |  |
| But take it: if the smack is sour, |  |
| The better for the embittered hour; |  |
| It should do good to heart and head | *55* |
| When your soul is in my soul’s stead; |  |
| And I will friend you, if I may, |  |
| In the dark and cloudy day. |  |
|  |  |
| There was a king reigned in the East: |  |
| There, when kings will sit to feast, | *60* |
| They get their fill before they think |  |
| With poisoned meat and poisoned drink. |  |
| He gathered all that springs to birth |  |
| From the many-venomed earth; |  |
| First a little, thence to more, | *65* |
| He sampled all her killing store; |  |
| And easy, smiling, seasoned sound, |  |
| Sate the king when healths went round. |  |
| They put arsenic in his meat |  |
| And stared aghast to watch him eat; | *70* |
| They poured strychnine in his cup |  |
| And shook to see him drink it up: |  |
| They shook, they stared as white’s their shirt: |  |
| Them it was their poison hurt. |  |
| —I tell the tale that I heard told. | *75* |
| Mithridates, he died old. |  |

Ars Poetica

Archibald Macleish

A poem should be palpable and mute

As a globed fruit,

Dumb

As old medallions to the thumb,

Silent as the sleeve-worn stone

Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—

A poem should be wordless

As the flight of birds.

                         \*

A poem should be motionless in time

As the moon climbs,

Leaving, as the moon releases

Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,

Memory by memory the mind—

A poem should be motionless in time

As the moon climbs.

                         \*

A poem should be equal to:

Not true.

For all the history of grief

An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love

The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—

A poem should not mean

But be.

The Planned Child

Sharon Olds

I hated the fact that they had planned me, she had taken

a cardboard out of his shirt from the laundry

as if sliding the backbone up out of his body,

and made a chart of the month and put

her temperature on it, rising and falling,

to know the day to make me--I would have

liked to have been conceived in heat,

in haste, by mistake, in love, in sex,

not on cardboard, the little x on the

rising line that did not fall again.

But when a friend was pouring wine

and said that I seem to have been a child who had been wanted,

I took the wine against my lips

as if my mouth were moving along

that valved wall in my mother's body, she was

bearing down, and then breathing from the mask, and then

bearing down, pressing me out into

the world that was not enough for her without me in it,

not the moon, the sun, Orion

cartwheeling across the dark, not

the earth, the sea--none of it

was enough, for her, without me.

The Victims

Sharon Olds

When Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and   
took it in silence, all those years and then   
kicked you out, suddenly, and her   
kids loved it. Then you were fired, and we   
grinned inside, the way people grinned when   
Nixon's helicopter lifted off the South   
Lawn for the last time. We were tickled   
to think of your office taken away,   
your secretaries taken away,   
your lunches with three double bourbons,   
your pencils, your reams of paper. Would they take your   
suits back, too, those dark   
carcasses hung in your closet, and the black   
noses of your shoes with their large pores?   
She had taught us to take it, to hate you and take it   
until we pricked with her for your   
annihilation, Father. Now I   
pass the bums in doorways, the white   
slugs of their bodies gleaming through slits in their   
suits of compressed silt, the stained   
flippers of their hands, the underwater   
fire of their eyes, ships gone down with the   
lanterns lit, and I wonder who took it and   
took it from them in silence until they had   
given it all away and had nothing   
left but this.

Ethics

Linda Pastan

In ethics class so many years ago  
our teacher asked this question every fall:  
If there were a fire in a museum,  
which would you save, a Rembrandt painting  
or an old woman who hadn’t many  
years left anyhow?  Restless on hard chairs  
caring little for pictures or old age  
we’d opt one year for life, the next for art  
and always half-heartedly.  Sometimes  
the woman borrowed my grandmother’s face  
leaving her usual kitchen to wander  
some drafty, half-imagined museum.  
One year, feeling clever, I replied  
why not let the woman decide herself?  
Linda, the teacher would report, eschews  
the burdens of responsibility.  
This fall in a real museum I stand  
before a real Rembrandt, old woman,  
or nearly so, myself.  The colors  
within this frame are darker than autumn,  
darker even than winter — the browns of earth,  
though earth’s most radiant elements burn  
through the canvas. I know now that woman  
and painting and season are almost one  
and all beyond the saving of children.

Sonnet 18

William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimmed;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance, or nature’s changing course, untrimmed;

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st,

Nor shall death brag thou wand’rest in his shade,

When in eternal lines to Time thou grow’st.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer

John Keats

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,

    And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;

    Round many western islands have I been

Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.

Oft of one wide expanse had I been told

    That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;

    Yet did I never breathe its pure serene

Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

    When a new planet swims into his ken;

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes

    He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men

Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—

    Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

A Study Of Reading Habits

Philip Larkin

When getting my nose in a book  
Cured most things short of school,  
It was worth ruining my eyes  
To know I could still keep cool,  
And deal out the old right hook  
To dirty dogs twice my size.  
  
Later, with inch-thick specs,  
Evil was just my lark:  
Me and my cloak and fangs  
Had ripping times in the dark.  
The women I clubbed with sex!  
I broke them up like meringues.  
  
Don't read much now: the dude  
Who lets the girl down before  
The hero arrives, the chap  
Who's yellow and keeps the store  
Seem far too familiar. Get stewed:  
Books are a load of crap.

The Whipping

Robert Hayden

The old woman across the way  
    is whipping the boy again  
and shouting to the neighborhood  
    her goodness and his wrongs.  
  
Wildly he crashes through elephant ears,  
    pleads in dusty zinnias,  
while she in spite of crippling fat  
    pursues and corners him.  
  
She strikes and strikes the shrilly circling  
    boy till the stick breaks  
in her hand.  His tears are rainy weather  
    to woundlike memories:  
  
My head gripped in bony vise  
    of knees, the writhing struggle  
to wrench free, the blows, the fear  
    worse than blows that hateful  
  
Words could bring, the face that I  
    no longer knew or loved . . .  
Well, it is over now, it is over,  
    and the boy sobs in his room,  
  
And the woman leans muttering against  
    a tree, exhausted, purged—  
avenged in part for lifelong hidings  
    she has had to bear.

Those Winter Sundays

Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early

and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,

then with cracked hands that ached

from labor in the weekday weather made

banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.

When the rooms were warm, he’d call,

and slowly I would rise and dress,

fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,

who had driven out the cold

and polished my good shoes as well.

What did I know, what did I know

of love’s austere and lonely offices?

One Art

Elizabeth Bishop

The art of losing isn’t hard to master;

so many things seem filled with the intent

to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster

of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:

places, and names, and where it was you meant

to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother’s watch. And look! my last, or

next-to-last, of three loved houses went.

The art of losing isn’t hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,

some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

I miss them, but it wasn’t a disaster.

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture

I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident

the art of losing’s not too hard to master

though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Robert Frost

Nature’s first green is gold,

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf’s a flower;

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.

Running On Empty

Robert Phillips

As a teenager I would drive Father’s  
Chevrolet cross-country, given me  
  
reluctantly: “Always keep the tank  
half full, boy, half full, ya hear?”  
  
The fuel gage dipping, dipping  
toward Empty, hitting Empty, then  
  
-thrilling!-‘way below Empty,  
myself driving cross-country  
  
mile after mile, faster and faster,  
all night long, this crazy kid driving  
  
the earth’s rolling surface,  
against all laws. Defying chemistry,  
  
rules, and time, riding on nothing  
but fumes, pushing luck harder  
  
than anyone pushed before, the wind  
screaming past like the Furies…  
  
I stranded myself only once, a white  
night with no gas station open, ninety miles  
  
from nowhere. Panicked for awhile  
at standstill, myself stalled.  
  
At dawn the car and I both refilled. But,  
Father, I am running on empty still.

First Fig

Edna St. Vincent Millay

My candle burns at both ends;

   It will not last the night;

But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends—

   It gives a lovely light!

The Chimney Sweeper

William Blake

When my mother died I was very young,

And my father sold me while yet my tongue

Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"

So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head

That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,

"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,

You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

And so he was quiet, & that very night,

As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!

That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,

Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,

And he opened the coffins & set them all free;

Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,

And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,

They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.

And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,

He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark

And got with our bags & our brushes to work.

Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;

So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

Blandeur

Kay Ryan

If it please God,

let less happen.

Even out Earth's

rondure, flatten

Eiger, blanden

the Grand Canyon.

Make valleys

slightly higher,

widen fissures

to arable land,

remand your

terrible glaciers

and silence

their calving,

halving or doubling

all geographical features

toward the mean.

Unlean against our hearts.

Withdraw your grandeur

from these parts.

Living in Sin

Adrienne Rich

She had thought the studio would keep itself;

no dust upon the furniture of love.

Half heresy, to wish the taps less vocal,

the panes relieved of grime. A plate of pears,

a piano with a Persian shawl, a cat

stalking the picturesque amusing mouse

had risen at his urging.

Not that at five each separate stair would writhe

under the milkman's tramp; that morning light

so coldly would delineate the scraps

of last night's cheese and three sepulchral bottles;

that on the kitchen shelf among the saucers

a pair of beetle-eyes would fix her own---

envoy from some village in the moldings . . .

Meanwhile, he, with a yawn,

sounded a dozen notes upon the keyboard,

declared it out of tune, shrugged at the mirror,

rubbed at his beard, went out for cigarettes;

while she, jeered by the minor demons,

pulled back the sheets and made the bed and found

a towel to dust the table-top,

and let the coffee-pot boil over on the stove.

By evening she was back in love again,

though not so wholly but throughout the night

she woke sometimes to feel the daylight coming

like a relentless milkman up the stairs.

Ballad of Birmingham

Dudley Randall

*(On the bombing of a church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1963)*

“Mother dear, may I go downtown

Instead of out to play,

And march the streets of Birmingham

In a Freedom March today?”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,

For the dogs are fierce and wild,

And clubs and hoses, guns and jails

Aren’t good for a little child.”

“But, mother, I won’t be alone.

Other children will go with me,

And march the streets of Birmingham

To make our country free.”

“No, baby, no, you may not go,

For I fear those guns will fire.

But you may go to church instead

And sing in the children’s choir.”

She has combed and brushed her night-dark hair,

And bathed rose petal sweet,

And drawn white gloves on her small brown hands,

And white shoes on her feet.

The mother smiled to know her child

Was in the sacred place,

But that smile was the last smile

To come upon her face.

For when she heard the explosion,

Her eyes grew wet and wild.

She raced through the streets of Birmingham

Calling for her child.

She clawed through bits of glass and brick,

Then lifted out a shoe.

“O, here’s the shoe my baby wore,

But, baby, where are you?”

Love Is Not All

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink

Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;

Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink

And rise and sink and rise and sink again;

Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,

Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;

Yet many a man is making friends with death

Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.

It well may be that in a difficult hour,

Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,

Or nagged by want past resolution’s power,

I might be driven to sell your love for peace,

Or trade the memory of this night for food.

It well may be. I do not think I would.

The Man He Killed

Thomas Hardy

"Had he and I but met

            By some old ancient inn,

We should have sat us down to wet

            Right many a nipperkin!

            "But ranged as infantry,

            And staring face to face,

I shot at him as he at me,

            And killed him in his place.

            "I shot him dead because —

            Because he was my foe,

Just so: my foe of course he was;

            That's clear enough; although

            "He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,

            Off-hand like — just as I —

Was out of work — had sold his traps —

            No other reason why.

            "Yes; quaint and curious war is!

            You shoot a fellow down

You'd treat if met where any bar is,

            Or help to half-a-crown."

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Wilfred Owen

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 disappointed shells that dropped 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,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the 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.

Picnic, Lightning

Billy Collins

“My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three." - *Lolita*

It is possible to be struck by a meteor

or a single-engine plane

while reading in a chair at home.

Safes drop from rooftops

and flatten the odd pedestrian

mostly within the panels of the comics,

but still, we know it is possible,

as well as the flash of summer lightning,

the thermos toppling over,

spilling out on the grass.

And we know the message

can be delivered from within.

The heart, no valentine,

decides to quit after lunch,

the power shut off like a switch,

or a tiny dark ship is unmoored

into the flow of the body’s rivers,

the brain a monastery,

defenseless on the shore.

This is what I think about

when I shovel compost

into a wheelbarrow,

and when I fill the long flower boxes,

then press into rows

the limp roots of red impatiens–

the instant hand of Death

always ready to burst forth

from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak.

Then the soil is full of marvels,

bits of leaf like flakes off a fresco,

red-brown pine needles, a beetle quick

to burrow back under the loam.

Then the wheelbarrow is a wilder blue,

the clouds a brighter white,

and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge

against a round stone,

the small plants singing

with lifted faces, and the click

of the sundial

as one hour sweeps into the next.

Aubade

Philip Larkin

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.  
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what's really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.  
Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.  
The mind blanks at the glare. Not in remorse  
- The good not done, the love not given, time  
Torn off unused - nor wretchedly because  
An only life can take so long to climb  
Clear of its wrong beginnings, and may never;  
But at the total emptiness for ever,  
The sure extinction that we travel to  
And shall be lost in always. Not to be here,  
Not to be anywhere,  
And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.  
  
This is a special way of being afraid  
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,  
That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And specious stuff that says No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel, not seeing  
That this is what we fear - no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anasthetic from which none come round.  
  
And so it stays just on the edge of vision,  
A small, unfocused blur, a standing chill  
That slows each impulse down to indecision.  
Most things may never happen: this one will,  
And realisation of it rages out  
In furnace-fear when we are caught without  
People or drink. Courage is no good:  
It means not scaring others. Being brave  
Lets no one off the grave.  
Death is no different whined at than withstood.  
  
Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.  
It stands plain as a wardrobe, what we know,  
Have always known, know that we can't escape,  
Yet can't accept. One side will have to go.  
Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring  
In locked-up offices, and all the uncaring  
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.  
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.  
Work has to be done.  
Postmen like doctors go from house to house.

In Bed With A Book

Mona Van Duyn

In police procedurals they are dying all over town,  
the life ripped out of them, by gun, bumper, knife,  
hammer, dope, etcetera, and no clues at all.  
All through the book the calls come in: body found  
in bed, car, street, lake, park, garage, library,  
and someone goes out to look and write it down.  
Death begins life's whole routine to-do  
in these stories of our fellow citizens.  
  
Nobody saw it happen, or everyone saw,  
but can't remember the car. What difference does it make  
when the child will never fall in love, the girl will never  
have a child, the man will never see a grandchild, the old maid  
will never have another cup of hot cocoa at bedtime?  
Like life, the dead are dead, their consciousness,  
as dear to them as mine to me, snuffed out.  
What has mind to do with this, when the earth is bereaved?

I lie, with my dear ones, holding a fictive umbrella,  
while around us falls the real and acid rain.  
The handle grows heavier and heavier in my hand.  
Unlike life, tomorrow night under the bedlamp  
by a quick link of thought someone will find out why,  
and the policemen and their wives and I will feel better.  
But all that's toward the end of the book. Meantime, tonight,  
without a clue I enter sleep's little rehearsal.

What the Living Do

Marie Howe

Johnny, the kitchen sink has been clogged for days, some utensil probably fell down there.

And the Drano won’t work but smells dangerous, and the crusty dishes have piled up

waiting for the plumber I still haven’t called. This is the everyday we spoke of.

It’s winter again: the sky’s a deep, headstrong blue, and the sunlight pours through

the open living-room windows because the heat’s on too high in here and I can’t turn it off.

For weeks now, driving, or dropping a bag of groceries in the street, the bag breaking,

I’ve been thinking: This is what the living do. And yesterday, hurrying along those

wobbly bricks in the Cambridge sidewalk, spilling my coffee down my wrist and sleeve,

I thought it again, and again later, when buying a hairbrush: This is it.

Parking. Slamming the car door shut in the cold. What you called that yearning.

What you finally gave up. We want the spring to come and the winter to pass. We want

whoever to call or not call, a letter, a kiss—we want more and more and then more of it.

But there are moments, walking, when I catch a glimpse of myself in the window glass,

say, the window of the corner video store, and I’m gripped by a cherishing so deep

for my own blowing hair, chapped face, and unbuttoned coat that I’m speechless:

I am living. I remember you.

Shopping in Tuckahoe

Jane Flanders  
  
One could spend years in this parking lot  
waiting for a daughter to find just the right  
pair of jeans. From time to time I slip the meter  
its nickel fix. Across the street in Epstein's  
basement, shoppers pick their way through bins  
of clothes made tempting by the words, "marked down."  
We have replaced making things with looking for them.  
  
My mood is such I almost miss what's happening next door,  
where a weedy lot is conducting its own  
January clearance with giveaways galore—  
millions of seeds, husks, vines, bare sepals  
glinting like cruisewear in the cold sun.  
"Come in," says the wind. "We love your pale hair  
and skin, the fine lines in your brow."  
  
The shades of choice are bone and dust, everything  
starched, rustling like taffeta, brushing against me  
with offers of free samples—thorns, burrs, fluff,  
twigs stripped of fussy flowers.  
Greedy as any bargain hunter, I gather them in,  
till my arms are filled with the residue of plenty.  
  
By the time my daughter reappears, trailing her scarves  
of pink and green, she will be old enough  
to drive home alone. I have left the keys for her.  
She'll never spot me standing here like a winter bouquet  
with my straw shield, my helmet of seeds and sparrows.

The Bistro Styx

Rita Dove

She was thinner, with a mannered gauntness

as she paused just inside the double

glass doors to survey the room, silvery cape

billowing dramatically behind her. *What’s this,*

I thought, lifting a hand until

she nodded and started across the parquet;

that’s when I saw she was dressed all in gray,

from a kittenish cashmere skirt and cowl

down to the graphite signature of her shoes.

“Sorry I’m late,” she panted, though

she wasn’t, sliding into the chair, her cape

tossed off in a shudder of brushed steel.

We kissed. Then I leaned back to peruse

my blighted child, this wary aristocratic mole.

“How’s business?” I asked, and hazarded

a motherly smile to keep from crying out:

Are you content to conduct your life

as a cliché and, what’s worse,

an anachronism, the brooding artist’s demimonde?

Near the rue Princesse they had opened

a gallery *cum* souvenir shop which featured

fuzzy off-color Monets next to his acrylics, no doubt,

plus bearded African drums and the occasional miniature

gargoyle from Notre Dame the Great Artist had

carved at breakfast with a pocket knife.

“Tourists love us. The Parisians, of course”—

she blushed—“are amused, though not without

a certain admiration ...”

                                     The Chateaubriand

arrived on a bone-white plate, smug and absolute

in its fragrant crust, a black plug steaming

like the heart plucked from the chest of a worthy enemy;

one touch with her fork sent pink juices streaming.

“Admiration for what?” Wine, a bloody

Pinot Noir, brought color to her cheeks. “Why,

the aplomb with which we’ve managed

to support our Art”—meaning he’d convinced

her to pose nude for his appalling canvases,

faintly futuristic landscapes strewn

with carwrecks and bodies being chewed

by rabid cocker spaniels. “I’d like to come by

the studio,” I ventured, “and see the new stuff.”

“Yes, if you wish ...” A delicate rebuff

before the warning: “He dresses all

in black now. Me, he drapes in blues and carmine—

and even though I think it’s kinda cute,

in company I tend toward more muted shades.”

She paused and had the grace

to drop her eyes. She did look ravishing,

spookily insubstantial, a lipstick ghost on tissue,

or as if one stood on a fifth-floor terrace

peering through a fringe of rain at Paris’

dreaming chimney pots, each sooty issue

wobbling skyward in an ecstatic oracular spiral.

“And he never thinks of food. I wish

I didn’t have to plead with him to eat ....” Fruit

and cheese appeared, arrayed on leaf-green dishes.

I stuck with café crème. “This Camembert’s

so ripe,” she joked, “it’s practically grown hair,”

mucking a golden glob complete with parsley sprig

onto a heel of bread. Nothing seemed to fill

her up: She swallowed, sliced into a pear,

speared each tear-shaped lavaliere

and popped the dripping mess into her pretty mouth.

Nowhere the bright tufted fields, weighted

vines and sun poured down out of the south.

“But are you happy?” Fearing, I whispered it

quickly. “What? You know, Mother”—

she bit into the starry rose of a fig—

“one really should try the fruit here.”

*I’ve lost her,* I thought, and called for the bill.

Follower

Seamus Heaney

My father worked with a horse-plough,  
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung  
Between the shafts and the furrow.  
The horse strained at his clicking tongue.   
  
An expert. He would set the wing  
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.  
The sod rolled over without breaking.  
At the headrig, with a single pluck   
  
Of reins, the sweating team turned round  
And back into the land. His eye  
Narrowed and angled at the ground,  
Mapping the furrow exactly.   
  
I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,  
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;  
Sometimes he rode me on his back  
Dipping and rising to his plod.   
  
I wanted to grow up and plough,  
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.  
All I ever did was follow  
In his broad shadow round the farm.   
  
I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,  
Yapping always. But today   
It is my father who keeps stumbling  
Behind me, and will not go away.

Digging

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.

The Writer

Richard Wilbur

In her room at the prow of the house

Where light breaks, and the windows are tossed with linden,

My daughter is writing a story.

I pause in the stairwell, hearing

From her shut door a commotion of typewriter-keys

Like a chain hauled over a gunwale.

Young as she is, the stuff

Of her life is a great cargo, and some of it heavy:

I wish her a lucky passage.

But now it is she who pauses,

As if to reject my thought and its easy figure.

A stillness greatens, in which

The whole house seems to be thinking,

And then she is at it again with a bunched clamor

Of strokes, and again is silent.

I remember the dazed starling

Which was trapped in that very room, two years ago;

How we stole in, lifted a sash

And retreated, not to affright it;

And how for a helpless hour, through the crack of the door,

We watched the sleek, wild, dark

And iridescent creature

Batter against the brilliance, drop like a glove

To the hard floor, or the desk-top,

And wait then, humped and bloody,

For the wits to try it again; and how our spirits

Rose when, suddenly sure,

It lifted off from a chair-back,

Beating a smooth course for the right window

And clearing the sill of the world.

It is always a matter, my darling,

Of life or death, as I had forgotten. I wish

What I wished you before, but harder.

Spinster

Sylvia Plath

Now this particular girl

During a ceremonious april walk

With her latest suitor

Found herself, of a sudden, intolerably struck

By the birds' irregular babel

And the leaves' litter.

By this tumult afflicted, she

Observed her lover's gestures unbalance the air,

His gait stray uneven

Through a rank wilderness of fern and flower;

She judged petals in disarray,

The whole season, sloven.

How she longed for winter then! --

Scrupulously austere in its order

Of white and black

Ice and rock; each sentiment within border,

And heart's frosty discipline

Exact as a snowflake.

But here -- a burgeoning

Unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits

Into vulgar motley --

A treason not to be borne; let idiots

Reel giddy in bedlam spring:

She withdrew neatly.

And round her house she set

Such a barricade of barb and check

Against mutinous weather

As no mere insurgent man could hope to break

With curse, fist, threat

Or love, either.

Since There’s No Help

Michael Drayton

Since there’s no help, come let us kiss and part.

Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;

And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,

That thus so cleanly I myself can free.

Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,

And when we meet at any time again,

Be it not seen in either of our brows

That we one jot of former love retain.

Now at the last gasp of Love’s latest breath,

When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies;

When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,

And Innocence is closing up his eyes—

Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,

From death to life thou might’st him yet recover!

Mad Girl's Love Song

Sylvia Plath

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;  
I lift my lids and all is born again.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)  
  
The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,  
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.  
  
I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed  
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)  
  
God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:  
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.  
  
I fancied you'd return the way you said,  
But I grow old and I forget your name.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)  
  
I should have loved a thunderbird instead;  
At least when spring comes they roar back again.  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.  
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

A Work of Artifice

Marge Piercy

The bonsai tree  
in the attractive pot  
could have grown eighty feet tall  
on the side of a mountain  
till split by lightning.  
But a gardener  
carefully pruned it.  
It is nine inches high.  
Every day as he  
whittles back the branches  
the gardener croons,  
It is your nature  
to be small and cozy,  
domestic and weak;  
how lucky, little tree,  
to have a pot to grow in.  
With living creatures  
one must begin very early  
to dwarf their growth:  
the bound feet,  
the crippled brain,  
the hair in curlers,  
the hands you  
love to touch.

**Traveling Light**

Linda Pastan, 1932

I’m only leaving you

for a handful of days,

but it feels as though

I’ll be gone forever—

the way the door closes

behind me with such solidity,

the way my suitcase

carries everything

I’d need for an eternity

of traveling light.

I’ve left my hotel number

on your desk, instructions

about the dog

and heating dinner. But

like the weather front

they warn is on its way

with its switchblades

of wind and ice,

our lives have minds

of their own.

**“Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art” BY** [**JOHN KEATS**](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-keats)

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art—

         Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

And watching, with eternal lids apart,

         Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,

The moving waters at their priestlike task

         Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask

         Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—

No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,

         Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,

To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,

         Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

**Meeting at Night** – Robert Browning

The grey sea and the long black land;

And the yellow half-moon large and low;

And the startled little waves that leap

In fiery ringlets from their sleep,

As I gain the cove with pushing prow,

And quench its speed i' the slushy sand.

Then a mile of warm sea-scented beach;

Three fields to cross till a farm appears;

A tap at the pane, the quick sharp scratch

And blue spurt of a lighted match,

And a voice less loud, thro' its joys and fears,

Than the two hearts beating each to each!

**Sonnet 138: When my love swears that she is made of truth**

BY [WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/william-shakespeare)

|  |
| --- |
|  |

When my love swears that she is made of truth,

I do believe her, though I know she lies,

That she might think me some untutored youth,

Unlearnèd in the world’s false subtleties.

Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,

Although she knows my days are past the best,

Simply I credit her false-speaking tongue:

On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed.

But wherefore says she not she is unjust?

And wherefore say not I that I am old?

Oh, love’s best habit is in seeming trust,

And age in love loves not to have years told.

   Therefore I lie with her and she with me,

    And in our faults by lies we flattered be.

**Mirror - Sylvia Plath**

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

Whatever I see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful ‚

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

**To The Virgins, To Make Much Of Time – Robert Herrick**

Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,

         Old Time is still a flying:

    And this same flower that smiles today,

         Tomorrow will be dying.

    The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,

         The higher he's a getting;

    The sooner will his race be run,

         And nearer he's to setting.

    That age is best, which is the first,

         When youth and blood are warmer;

    But being spent, the worse, and worst

         Times, still succeed the former.

    Then be not coy, but use your time;

         And while ye may, go marry:

    For having lost but once your prime,

         You may forever tarry.

**Barbie Doll – Marge Piercy**

This girlchild was born as usual

and presented dolls that did pee-pee

and miniature GE stoves and irons

and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.

Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:

You have a great big nose and fat legs.

She was healthy, tested intelligent,

possessed strong arms and back,

abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity.

She went to and fro apologizing.

Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.

She was advised to play coy,

exhorted to come on hearty,

exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.

Her good nature wore out

like a fan belt.

So she cut off her nose and her legs

and offered them up.

In the casket displayed on satin she lay

with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,

a turned-up putty nose,

dressed in a pink and white nightie.

Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.

Consummation at last.

To every woman a happy ending.

**Ozymandias – Percy Shelley**

I met a traveller from an antique land,

Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

My name is [Ozymandias](javascript:;), King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

**My Last Duchess – Robert Browning**

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will ‘t please you sit and look at her? I said

‘Frà Pandolf’ by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ‘t was not

Her husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps

Frà Pandolf chanced to say, ‘Her mantle laps

Over my lady’s wrist too much,' or ‘Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough

For calling up that spot of joy. She had

A heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, ‘t was all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace -- all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men, -- good! but thanked

Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech -- (which I have not) -- to make your will

Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this

Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark’ -- and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,

-- E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will ‘t please you rise? We’ll meet

The company below then. I repeat,

The Count your master’s known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretence

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed

At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go

Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

**When I heard the Learn’d Astronomer –**

**Walt Whitman**

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,

When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,

When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,

Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,

In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,

Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

**My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun (Sonnet 130)**

**William Shakespeare**

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;

If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;

If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

I have seen roses damasked, red and white,

But no such roses see I in her cheeks;

And in some perfumes is there more delight

Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.

I love to hear her speak, yet well I know

That music hath a far more pleasing sound;

I grant I never saw a goddess go;

My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.

And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare

As any she belied with false compare.

**History Lesson**

**BY** [**NATASHA TRETHEWEY**](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/natasha-trethewey)

I am four in this photograph, standing

on a wide strip of Mississippi beach,

my hands on the flowered hips

of a bright bikini. My toes dig in,

curl around wet sand. The sun cuts

the rippling Gulf in flashes with each

tidal rush. Minnows dart at my feet

glinting like switchblades. I am alone

except for my grandmother, other side

of the camera, telling me how to pose.

It is 1970, two years after they opened

the rest of this beach to us,

forty years since the photograph

where she stood on a narrow plot

of sand marked *colored*, smiling,

her hands on the flowered hips

of a cotton meal-sack dress.

**Dover Beach**

**BY** [**MATTHEW ARNOLD**](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/matthew-arnold)

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanched land,

Listen! you hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,

At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago

Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought

Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow

Of human misery; we

Find also in the sound a thought,

Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.

**Woman Work – Maya Angelou**

I've got the children to tend

The clothes to mend

The floor to mop

The food to shop

Then the chicken to fry

The baby to dry

I got company to feed

The garden to weed

I've got shirts to press

The tots to dress

The cane to be cut

I gotta clean up this hut

Then see about the sick

And the cotton to pick.

Shine on me, sunshine

Rain on me, rain

Fall softly, dewdrops

And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here

With your fiercest wind

Let me float across the sky

'Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes

Cover me with white

Cold icy kisses and

Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky

Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone

Star shine, moon glow

You're all that I can call my own.

**That Time of Year – Sonnet 73**

**William Shakespeare**

That time of year thou mayst in me behold,

When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang.

In me thou seest the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west,

Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self that seals up all in rest.

In me thou seest the glowing of such fire

That on the ashes of his youth doth lie

As the death-bed whereon it must expire,

Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

**Do not go gentle into that good night**

**Dylan Thomas, 1914 – 1953**

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 had 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.

**Death, be not proud (Holy Sonnet 10)**

**John Donne, 1572 – 1631**

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;

For those whom thou think’st thou dost overthrow

Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul’s delivery.

Thou’art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy’or charms can make us sleep as well

And better than thy stroke; why swell’st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

[**Weighing the Dog, Billy Collins**](http://poetry365.tumblr.com/post/113555840/weighing-the-dog-billy-collins)

It is awkward for me and bewildering for him

as I hold him in my arms in the small bathroom,

balancing our weight on the shaky blue scale,

but this is the way to weigh a dog and easier

than training him to sit obediently on one spot

with his tongue out, waiting for the cookie.

With pencil and paper I subtract my weight

from our total to find out the remainder that is his,

and I start to wonder if there is an analogy here.

It could not have to do with my leaving you

though I never figured out what you amounted to

until I subtracted myself from our combination.

You held me in your arms more than I held you

through all those awkward and bewildering months

and now we are both lost in strange and distant neighborhoods.

**Persephone, Falling – by Rita Dove**

One narcissus among the ordinary beautiful

flowers, one unlike all the others! She pulled,

stooped to pull harder—

when, sprung out of the earth

on his glittering terrible

carriage, he claimed his due.

It is finished. No one heard her.

No one! She had strayed from the herd.

(Remember: go straight to school.

This is important, stop fooling around!

Don’t answer to strangers. Stick

with your playmates. Keep your eyes down.)

This is how easily the pit

opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground.

**Sympathy**

**BY** [**PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR**](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/paul-laurence-dunbar)

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

    When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;

When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,

And the river flows like a stream of glass;

    When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,

And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—

I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

    Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;

For he must fly back to his perch and cling

When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

    And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars

And they pulse again with a keener sting—

I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

    When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—

When he beats his bars and he would be free;

It is not a carol of joy or glee,

But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,

But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—

I know why the caged bird sings!

**To an Athlete Dying Young**

**BY** [**A. E. HOUSMAN**](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/a-e-housman)

The time you won your town the race

We chaired you through the market-place;

Man and boy stood cheering by,

And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come,

Shoulder-high we bring you home,

And set you at your threshold down,

Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away

From fields where glory does not stay,

And early though the laurel grows

It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut

Cannot see the record cut,

And silence sounds no worse than cheers

After earth has stopped the ears.

Now you will not swell the rout

Of lads that wore their honours out,

Runners whom renown outran

And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,

The fleet foot on the sill of shade,

And hold to the low lintel up

The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head

Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,

And find unwithered on its curls

The garland briefer than a girl’s.

**Mother to Son – Langston Hughes**

Well, son, I'll tell you:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,

And splinters,

And boards torn up,

And places with no carpet on the floor—

Bare.

But all the time

I'se been a-climbin' on,

And reachin' landin's,

And turnin' corners,

And sometimes goin' in the dark

Where there ain't been no light.

So, boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps.

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I'se still goin', honey,

I'se still climbin',

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

**The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner**

**Randall Jarrell, 1914 – 1965**

From my mother’s sleep I fell into the State,

And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.

Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,

I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.

When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

**Let me not to the marriage of true minds**

**Sonnet 116**

**William Shakespeare**

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove:

O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wandering bark,

Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken.

Love ’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle’s compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error, and upon me prov’d,

I never writ, nor no man ever lov’d.

**Ex-Basketball Player**

**BY** [**JOHN UPDIKE**](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/john-updike)

Pearl Avenue runs past the high-school lot,

Bends with the trolley tracks, and stops, cut off

Before it has a chance to go two blocks,

At Colonel McComsky Plaza. Berth’s Garage

Is on the corner facing west, and there,

Most days, you'll find Flick Webb, who helps Berth out.

Flick stands tall among the idiot pumps—

Five on a side, the old bubble-head style,

Their rubber elbows hanging loose and low.

One’s nostrils are two S’s, and his eyes

An E and O. And one is squat, without

A head at all—more of a football type.

Once Flick played for the high-school team, the Wizards.

He was good: in fact, the best. In ’46

He bucketed three hundred ninety points,

A county record still. The ball loved Flick.

I saw him rack up thirty-eight or forty

In one home game. His hands were like wild birds.

He never learned a trade, he just sells gas,

Checks oil, and changes flats. Once in a while,

As a gag, he dribbles an inner tube,

But most of us remember anyway.

His hands are fine and nervous on the lug wrench.

It makes no difference to the lug wrench, though.

Off work, he hangs around Mae’s Luncheonette.

Grease-gray and kind of coiled, he plays pinball,

Smokes those thin cigars, nurses lemon phosphates.

Flick seldom says a word to Mae, just nods

Beyond her face toward bright applauding tiers

Of Necco Wafers, Nibs, and Juju Beads.