

Edexcel O Level Poetry Anthology

For GCE O Level
English Literature

Contents

Introduction		2
William Shakespeare	Seven Ages of Man	3
William Blake	The Tyger	4
Lord Byron	When We Two Parted	5
John Keats	La Belle Dame sans Merci <i>(Revised Version)</i>	6
Henry W Longfellow	The Slave's Dream	7
Alfred, Lord Tennyson	The Lady of Shalott	8
Rudyard Kipling	If	10
D. H. Lawrence	Mosquito	11
Elizabeth Daryush	Children of Wealth in your Warm Nursery	13
Thomas Stearns Eliot	Preludes	14
W. H. Auden	Night Mail	15
Louis MacNeice	Prayer Before Birth	16
Dylan Thomas	Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night	17
Gabriel Okara	Once Upon a Time	18
Ted Hughes	Six Young Men	19
Fleur Adcock	The Telephone Call	20
Wole Soyinka	Telephone Conversation	21
Grace Nichols	Island Man	22
Carol Ann Duffy	War Photographer	23
Simon Armitage	Poem	24
Acknowledgements		25

Introduction

The Edexcel International GCE O level English Literature Poetry Anthology has been produced to provide a poetry text for study for Section B: Poetry of the syllabus. Students must study all the poems in the Anthology. Three questions will be set on the examination paper requiring students to write detailed and extended examinations of the poems they have studied. One question will be set on an unprepared poem not in the Anthology which will be printed in the examination paper. Students must answer one question only from Section B.

The poems have been organised on a chronological basis and brief biographical details of the poets have been provided. Students are advised to study this information in order to understand the background of the poets they are studying and the context of the poems.

It is hoped that teachers and students find the Anthology an accessible and stimulating introduction to poetry written in English. The contents of the Anthology will be reviewed annually and changes to the selection of poems may be made when it is felt to be appropriate. Teachers are welcome to make suggestions concerning the inclusion of new poems in the Anthology.

William

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Little is known about his early life but it is thought that he was educated at the local grammar school; he did not attend a university. It is thought that he later became a schoolmaster.

When Shakespeare went to London he did a variety of jobs and we know that he was already attracting attention in theatrical circles by 1592. In 1595 he joined the Lord Chamberlaine's Men which was one of the most important companies of actors who played for the Court. His reputation as a dramatist grew and he became a shareholder in the Globe Theatre. During the period 1590-1612 Shakespeare produced, on average, two plays a year; he also wrote poetry including comedies, histories, and tragedies. Shakespeare is considered the greatest playwright in English literature.

William Shakespeare 1564-1616

Seven Ages of Man

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose well sav'd a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.
(As You Like It)

William

William Blake was born in London in 1757. He did not go to school but was an apprentice to an engraver. Blake married in 1782 and his wife proved to be a great help to him in his engraving.

Blake was introduced to intellectual circles by his employer and two of his friends financed the publication of his first volume of poetry 'Poetical Sketches' in 1783. Blake developed a particular process of printing and he applied this technique to nearly all of his own literary works. Blake claimed to experience mystical visions and he claimed to converse with and receive visits from great people who had died. These experiences influenced his work greatly. Many people of his time considered him to be insane and it was not until the 20th century that there was an increased interest in his work.

William Blake 1757-1827

The Tyger

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes!
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?*

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?
(from Songs of Experience)

*God

Lord Byron

Lord Byron was born in 1788 in London. He succeeded to the family title when he was ten years old. He was educated at Harrow and Cambridge. Byron was an extremely wealthy, handsome young man and he led a life of extravagance. After making an unhappy marriage in 1815 Byron left England in 1816 amid many accusations regarding his behaviour and he never returned.

His first published poems appeared in 1807, 'Hours of Idleness', but they were not well received. His poetry was often attacked on moral grounds but it was very popular in England and even more so abroad. By 1812 Byron was one of the most famous poets in England.

Lord Byron 1788-1824

When We Two Parted

When we two parted
In silence and tears,
Half broken-hearted
To sever for years,
Pale grew thy cheek and cold,
Colder thy kiss;
Truly that hour foretold
Sorrow to this.

The dew of the morning
Sunk chill on my brow—
It felt like the warning
Of what I feel now.
Thy vows are all broken,
And light is thy fame;
I hear thy name spoken,
And share in its shame.

They name thee before me,
A knell to mine ear;
A shudder comes o'er me—
Why wert thou so dear?
They know not I knew thee,
Who knew thee too well:—
Long, long shall I rue thee,
Too deeply to tell.

In secret we met—
In silence I grieve,
That thy heart could forget,
Thy spirit deceive.
If I should meet thee
After long years,
How should I greet thee?
With silence and tear

John Keats

John Keats was born in 1795 in London. He was educated at Clark's School in Enfield. By the age of fourteen he had lost both of his parents. In 1810 he was made an apprentice to a surgeon and in 1815 moved to London initially as a 'dresser' and later as a surgeon.

Keats had individual poems published in various journals and his first volume of poems was published in 1817. Initially Keats' poetry did not meet with wide acclaim and this was a source of great sorrow to him. In spite of health problems Keats continued to write poetry and his second volume of poetry was published in 1820; this was far better received. Tuberculosis was making Keats increasingly ill and he died in Rome in 1821. Keats' reputation as a poet grew considerably after his death and he is now regarded as one of the major figures in the Romantic Movement.

John Keats 1795-1821

La Belle Dame sans Merci (*Revised Version*)

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
Alone and palely loitering;
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lilly on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheek a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a Lady in the meads
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sideways would she lean, and sing
A faery's song.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She look'd at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna* dew,
And sure in language strange she said,
I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot,
And there she gaz'd and sighed deep,
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—
So kiss'd to sleep.

And there we slumber'd on the moss,
And there I dream'd, ah woe betide
The latest dream I ever dream'd
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
Who cry'd—"La belle Dame sans merci
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloom
With horrid warning gaped wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill side.

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing.

*Food from heaven

Henry

Henry Longfellow was born in 1807 in Maine in America. He was educated at Bowdoin and in Europe. Longfellow became a professor at Harvard and was very innovative in his teaching of modern languages. There was tragedy in his life; he lost his first wife in 1835, he remarried in 1843 and then lost that wife in 1861 when she died as a result of burns from a domestic accident.

Longfellow believed that poetry had a duty to teach moral and academic lessons. By the 1840s Longfellow was one of the most widely read poets in America and he was later to be regarded as second only to Tennyson in popularity in the English speaking world. Today he is still thought of as the most successful didactic poet to have come out of the United States.

Henry W Longfellow 1807-1882

The Slave's Dream

Beside the ungathered rice he lay,
His sickle in his hand;
His breast was bare, his matted hair
Was buried in the sand.
Again, in the mist and shadow of sleep,
He saw his Native Land.

Wide through the landscape of his dreams
The lordly Niger flowed;
Beneath the palm-trees on the plain
Once more a king he strode;
And heard the tinkling caravans
Descend the mountain-road.

He saw once more his dark-eyed queen
Among her children stand;
They clasped his neck, they kissed his cheeks,
They held him by the hand!—
A tear burst from the sleeper's lids
And fell into the sand.

And then at furious speed he rode
Along the Niger's bank;
His bridle-reins were golden chains,
And, with a martial clank,
At each leap he could feel his scabbard of steel
Smiting his stallion's flank.

Before him, like a blood-red flag,
The bright flamingoes flew;
From morn till night he followed their flight,
O'er plains where the tamarind grew,
Till he saw the roofs of Caffre huts,
And the ocean rose to view.

At night he heard the lion roar,
And the hyena scream,
And the river-horse, as he crushed the reeds
Beside some hidden stream;
And it passed, like a glorious roll of drums,
Through the triumph of his dream.

The forests, with their myriad tongues,
Shouted of Liberty;
And the blast of the Desert cried aloud,
With a voice so wild and free,
That he started in his sleep and smiled
At their tempestuous glee.

He did not feel the driver's whip,
Nor the burning heat of day;
For Death had illumined the Land of Sleep,
And his lifeless body lay
A worn-out fetter, that the soul
Had broken and thrown away!

Alfred Lord

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was born in 1809 in Lincolnshire in England. He was educated at Cambridge University. Tennyson came from a rather unstable family, his father had been a violent alcoholic and had died in 1831. When he was twenty he won the Chancellor's Medal for his poem 'Timbuctoo', which was the first poem in blank verse ever to have won the medal.

Tennyson's fame as a poet was well established in his lifetime and he was held in high esteem by many admirers, including Queen Victoria. He was made Poet Laureate in 1850 and continued in that position for forty-two years. Towards the end of his life Tennyson's popularity was beginning to wane. Critical opinion has since been somewhat divided although it is generally agreed that Tennyson did excel in the lyrical form.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson 1809-1892

The Lady of Shalott

PART I

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And through the field the road runs by
 To many-towered Camelot*;
And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
 The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Through the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot.
Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
 The Lady of Shalott.

By the margin, willow-veiled,
Slide the heavy barges trailed
By slow horses; and unhailed
The shallop flitteth silken-sailed
 Skimming down to Camelot:
But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
 The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
 Down to towered Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
 Lady of Shalott."

PART II

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
 To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
 The Lady of Shalott.

And moving through a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
 Winding down to Camelot:
There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village-churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
 Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-haired page in crimson clad,
 Goes by to towered Camelot;
And sometimes through the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
 The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often through the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
 And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said
 The Lady of Shalott.

PART III

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling through the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
 Of bold Sir Lancelot.
A red-cross knight for ever kneeled
To a lady in his shield,
That sparkled on the yellow field,
 Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glittered free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy.
The bridle bells rang merrily
 As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazoned baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
 Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burned like one burning flame together,
 As he rode down to Camelot.
As often through the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
 Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;
On burnished hooves his war-horse trode;
From underneath his helmet flow'd
His coal-black curls as on he rode,
 As he rode down to Camelot.
From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river
 Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces through the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
 The Lady of Shalott.

PART IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,

The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
 Over towered Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
 The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seer in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance
 Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Through the noises of the night
 She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darkened wholly,
 Turned to towered Camelot.
For ere she reached upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
Dead-pale between the houses high,
 Silent into Camelot.
Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
 The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they crossed themselves for fear,
 All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
 The Lady of Shalott."

Rudyard

Rudyard Kipling was born in 1865 in Mumbai (Bombay). At the age of six he was sent to England to live at a boarding school with his younger sister. In 1882 he returned to India to work as a journalist, coming back to England seven years later. In England he quickly became the subject of wide acclaim. Kipling then lived for a while in Vermont and finally settled in England in 1902 although he continued to travel widely.

Kipling wrote short stories, novels and poetry and he had something of a reputation as the poet of the Empire. This reputation won him both admirers and critics, as did his style of writing which included much use of colloquial speech. Kipling's tales for children, however, have stood the test of time and 'The Jungle Book', for example, is still as popular today as it ever was.

Rudyard Kipling 1865-1936

If

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt
you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your
master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your
aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to,
broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out
tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it all on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and
sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold
on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your
virtue,
Or walk with kings—nor lose the common
touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

D H

D. H. Lawrence was born in 1885 in Nottinghamshire. He was the son of a coal miner and his mother had been a schoolteacher. One of five children, he grew up in poverty and amidst considerable parental discord. Lawrence did, however, manage to escape and get himself educated. Lawrence then eloped with the wife of one of his professors, a woman who was older than Lawrence and the mother of three children. They travelled a great deal and lived in many places including Mexico and Italy.

The Lawrences' lives were stormy and passionate and the nature of Lawrence's work often meant that they were the subjects of considerable scandal and disapprobation. Lawrence's stories and novels were frank explorations of life and love and caused offence at the time, although today no offence would be taken. It was really only after his death that attention was paid to the high quality of his poetry, which is just as immediate and personal as his prose.

D. H. Lawrence 1885-1930

Mosquito

When did you start your tricks
Monsieur?

What do you stand on such high legs for?
Why this length of shredded shank
You exaltation?

Is it so that you shall lift your centre of gravity upwards
And weigh no more than air as you alight upon me,
Stand upon me weightless, you phantom?

I heard a woman call you the Winged Victory
In sluggish Venice.
You turn your head towards your tail, and smile.

How can you put so much devilry
Into that translucent phantom shred
Of a frail corpus?

Queer, with your thin wings and your streaming legs
How you sail like a heron, on a dull clot of air,
A nothingness.

Yet what an aura surrounds you;
Your evil little aura, prowling, and casting a numbness on my
mind.

That is your trick, your bit of filthy magic:
Invisibility, and the anaesthetic power
To deaden my attention in your direction.

But I know your game now, streaky sorcerer.

Queer, how you stalk and prowl the air
In circles and evasions, enveloping me,
Ghoul on wings
Winged Victory.

Settle, and stand on long thin shanks
Eyeing me sideways, and cunningly conscious that I am aware,
You speck.

I hate the way you lurch off sideways into air
Having read my thoughts against you.

Come then, let us play at unawares,
And see who wins in this sly game of bluff,
Man or mosquito.

You don't know that I exist, and I don't know that you exist.
Now then!

It is your trump
It is your hateful little trump
You pointed fiend,
Which shakes my sudden blood to hatred of you:
It is your small, high, hateful bugle in my ear.

Why do you do it?
Surely it is bad policy.

They say you can't help it.

If that is so, then I believe a little in Providence protecting the
innocent.
But it sounds so amazingly like a slogan,
A yell of triumph as you snatch my scalp.

Blood, red blood
Super-magical
Forbidden liquor.

I behold you stand
For a second enspasmed in oblivion,
Obscenely ecstasied
Sucking live blood,
My blood.

Such silence, such suspended transport,
Such gorging,
Such obscenity of trespass.

You stagger
As well as you may.
Only your accursed hairy frailty
Your own imponderable weightlessness
Saves you, wafts you away on the very draught my anger makes
in its snatching.

Away with a paeon of derision
You winged blood-drop.

Can I not overtake you?
Are you one too many for me,
Winged Victory?
Am I not mosquito enough to out-mosquito you?

Queer, what a big stain my sucked blood makes
Beside the infinitesimal faint smear of you!
Queer, what a dim dark smudge you have disappeared into!

Elizabeth

Elizabeth Daryush was born in 1887 in Oxford. She was the daughter of the poet Robert Bridges and sometimes she is published under the name Elizabeth Bridges. She grew up in an atmosphere of poetry and knew many of the poets of her time. In 1923 she met and married Ali Akbar Daryush, an Iranian (Persian) Government official and they went to live in Iran (Persia) for four years.

Her first book of poems was published in 1911 and this was followed by another in 1916. In the 1930s Daryush published a series of poetry books. She did not achieve a great reputation at the time although her work was better known in the United States than in England. She had her own syllabic structures which she adhered to very strictly but she saw them only as the shells which enclosed the vital parts. There was a revival of interest in her work in the 1970s and she published two more poetry books, one in 1971 and one in 1976.

Elizabeth Daryush 1887-1976

Children of Wealth in your Warm Nursery

Children of wealth in your warm nursery,
Set in the cushioned window-seat to watch
The volleying snow, guarded invisibly
By the clear double pane through which no touch
Untimely penetrates, you cannot tell
What winter means; its cruel truths to you
Are only sound and sight; your citadel
Is safe from feeling, and from knowledge too.

Go down, go out to elemental wrong,
Waste your too round limbs, tan your skin too white;
The glass of comfort, ignorance, seems strong
To-day, and yet perhaps this very night
You'll wake to horror's wrecking fire—your home
Is wired within for this, in every room.

Thomas Stearns

T. S. Eliot was born in 1888 in Missouri in the United States. He was educated at Harvard, the Sorbonne and Oxford. Eliot moved to live in England in 1914 and in 1927 became a British citizen. He worked for a while as a teacher and for Lloyds Bank. In 1925 Eliot became a director of the publishers Faber and Faber. In 1922 Eliot founded a quarterly magazine called 'The Criterion' and in the first issue his poem 'The Wasteland' appeared. This poem has been described as the most famous poem of the twentieth century.

Eliot's poetry may be difficult to understand but Eliot felt that poetry should mean whatever it means to each individual reader; there is no one correct meaning. Eliot also wrote poetic drama for the theatre and he was a very influential critic. In 1948 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and the Order of Merit.

T. S. Eliot 1888-1965

Preludes

I

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

And then the lighting of the lamps.

II

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

With the other masquerades
That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

III

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.
And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters,
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

W H Auden

W. H. Auden was born in 1907 in York, England. He was educated at Oxford University after which he lived for a short period in Germany. On returning to England he became a schoolteacher. In 1939 Auden emigrated to America and became an American citizen in 1946. His absence from England during the war had an adverse effect on the way in which his poems were received in England for a period, but ultimately, the quality of his work won him recognition as a major poet.

His first volume of poetry was accepted by T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber in 1930 and immediately established him as an important poet. His work can be said to fall into two distinctive periods. The first was a response to the particular political and social issues of the time and the second may be characterised as being more religious in tone. Auden wrote dramatic monologues, narrative verse, sonnets, songs and prose poems. His influence on later poets has been enormous.

W.H. Auden 1907-1973

Night Mail

This is the night mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner and the girl next door.
Pulling up Beattock*, a steady climb—
The gradient's against her, but she's on time.

Past cotton grass and moorland boulder
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,
Snorting noisily as she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.
Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from the bushes at her blank-faced coaches.
Sheep dogs cannot turn her course,
They slumber on with paws across.
In the farm she passes no-one wakes,
But a jug in the bedroom gently shakes.

Dawn freshens, the climb is done.
Down towards Glasgow she descends
Towards the steam tugs yelping down the glade of
cranes,
Towards the fields of apparatus, the furnaces
Set on the dark plain like gigantic chessmen.
All Scotland waits for her:
In the dark glens, beside the pale-green lochs
Men long for news.

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from girl and boy,
Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or visit relations,
And applications for situations
And timid lovers' declarations
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,
Letters with faces scrawled in the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and Lowlands,
Notes from overseas to Hebrides—
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all wrong.

Thousands are still asleep
Dreaming of terrifying monsters,
Of a friendly tea beside the band at Cranston's or
Crawford's:
Asleep in working Glasgow, asleep in well-set
Edinburgh,
Asleep in granite Aberdeen.
They continue their dreams;
But shall wake soon and long for letters,
And none will hear the postman's knock
Without a quickening of the heart,
For who can hear and feel himself forgotten?

*The name of a hill

Louis

MacNeice was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1907. He studied at Oxford University and took a first in Greats. He had his first poetry book published in 1929. MacNeice lectured at Birmingham University and Bedford College whilst making several unsuccessful efforts to write for the theatre. He was however, during the 1930s, becoming known as a poet and he is now often regarded as the second most important poet of the 30s: Auden is usually regarded as the most important. In 1941 MacNeice worked for the BBC as a writer and producer in the Features Department. MacNeice is noted for his use of assonance, internal rhymes and half rhymes, and a ballad like repetition which was probably the result of his Irish upbringing.

Louis MacNeice 1907-1964

Prayer Before Birth

I am not yet born; O hear me.
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the club-
footed ghoul come near me.

I am not yet born, console me.
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me
with water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light
In the back of my mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,
my life when they murder by means of my
hands, my death when they live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white
waves call me to folly and the desert calls
me to doom and the beggar refuses
my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God
come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me
With strength against those who would freeze my
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
one face, a thing, and against all those
who would dissipate my entirety, would
blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
Otherwise kill me.

Dylan

Dylan Thomas was born in Wales in 1914. He started to write poetry whilst still at school and when he left school he became a journalist. In 1934 he moved to London and in the same year his first book of poetry was published. Dylan's life as a journalist, broadcaster and film maker in London acquired him a reputation of being very flamboyant and rather wild.

In contrast to the many rumours about his personal life, his life as a poet was careful and disciplined. His poetry was the result of exceedingly slow deliberation and much hard labour. It is said that he would often write only one line a day as he was obsessed to produce the very best that he could. Much of his poetry displays a great optimism about life.

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 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.

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.

Gabriel

Gabriel Okara was born in Western Nigeria in 1921. He was educated at the Government College in Umuahia and he trained as a bookbinder. In 1956 he went on to study journalism at Northwestern University at Illinois. On returning to Africa he became an information officer and then the director of a publishing house.

Okara may be described as highly original and uninfluenced by other poets. In 1979 he was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry prize. He has been extremely successful in capturing the moods, sights and sounds of Africa. His poems show great sensitivity, perceptive judgements and a tremendous energy. Okara also shows a concern regarding what happens when the ancient culture of Africa is faced with modern western culture.

Gabriel Okara 1921-

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, son,
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laugh with their eyes:
but now they only laugh with their teeth,
while their ice-block cold eyes
search behind my shadow.

There was a time indeed
they used to shake hands with their hearts:
but that's gone, son.
Now they shake hands without hearts
while their left hands search
my empty pockets.

'Feel at home'! 'Come again':
they say, and when I come
again and feel
at home, once, twice,
there will be no thrice -
for then I find doors shut on me.

So I have learned many things, son.
I have learned to wear many faces
like dresses - homeface,
officeface, streetface, hostface,
cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles
like a fixed portrait smile.

And I have learned too
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',
when I mean 'Good-riddance':
to say 'Glad to meet you',
without being glad; and to say 'It's been
nice talking to you', after being bored.

But believe me, son.
I want to be what I used to be
when I was like you. I want
to unlearn all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to relearn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
shows only my teeth like a snake's bare
fangs!

So show me, son,
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
once upon a time when I was like you.

Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes was born in 1930 in Yorkshire. He was educated at Cambridge University where he met the woman he was later to marry, Sylvia Plath. Plath was to become a poet of some renown and they were important influences on each other's work. After his wife's suicide in 1963 Hughes stopped writing poetry for three years.

As a boy Hughes spent a great deal of time in the dramatic landscape of his home and became fascinated by the power and violence which he observed in Nature. The fascination with violence was not, however, limited to the animal kingdom as his fascination also extended to violence in the human world. Personal heroism is explored by Hughes and he does this in poems which he sets in the First World War when the fighting was still very much more on a personal, man to man, level. Ted Hughes was made the Poet Laureate in 1984.

Ted Hughes 1930-1998

Six Young Men

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well—
Six young men, familiar to their friends.
Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.
Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride—
Six months after this picture they were all dead.

All are trimmed for a Sunday jaunt. I know
That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,
Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit
You hear the water of seven streams fall
To the roarer in the bottom, and through all
The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.
Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,
And still that valley has not changed its sound
Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

This one was shot in an attack and lay
Calling in the wire, then this one, his best friend,
Went out to bring him in and was shot too;
And this one, the very moment he was warned
From potting at tin-cans in no-man's-land,
Fell back dead with his rifle-sights shot away.
The rest, nobody knows what they came to,
But come to the worst they must have done, and held it
Closer than their hope; all were killed.

Here see a man's photograph,
The locket of a smile, turned overnight
Into the hospital of his mangled last
Agony and hours; see bundled in it
His mightier-than-a-man dead bulk and weight:
And on this one place which keeps him alive
(In his Sunday best)* see fall war's worst
Thinkable flash and rending, onto his smile
Forty years rotting into soil.

That man's not more alive whom you confront
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;
No thought so vivid as their smoking blood:
To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and heat.

**In the past, people wore their best clothes on a Sunday*

Fleur

Fleur Adcock was born in New Zealand in 1934 and moved around a great deal during her childhood years. She spent eight years in England between the ages of five and thirteen and during that time attended eleven different schools. This experience gave Adcock a deep understanding of what it is to be an outsider. Adcock began writing poetry almost from the age at which she learnt to write.

Adcock's poetry was certainly influenced by the move to greater freedom in the 1960s and she did experiment with quite a colloquial style. Her poetry displays a preference for understatement rather than exaggeration and she maintains a calm and detached view of things. Adcock is very concerned about the sound of her poems and she reads her poems aloud as she composes them.

Fleur Adcock 1934-

The Telephone Call

They asked me 'Are you sitting down?
Right? This is Universal Lotteries',
they said. 'You've won the top prize,
the Ultra-super Global Special.
What would you do with a million pounds?
Or actually, with more than a million—
not that it makes a lot of difference
once you're a millionaire.' And they laughed.

'Are you OK?' they asked – 'Still there?
Come on, now, tell us, how does it feel?'
I said 'I just...I can't believe it!'
They said 'That's what they all say.
What else? Go on, tell us about it.'
I said 'I feel the top of my head
has floated off, out through the window,
revolving like a flying saucer.'

'That's unusual' they said. 'Go on.'
I said 'I'm finding it hard to talk.
My throat's gone dry, my nose is tingling.
I think I'm going to sneeze – or cry.'
'That's right' they said, 'don't be ashamed
of giving way to your emotions.
It isn't every day you hear
you're going to get a million pounds.

Relax, now, have a little cry;
we'll give you a moment...' 'Hang on!' I said.
'I haven't bought a lottery ticket
for years and years. And what did you say the
company's called?' They laughed again.
'Not to worry about a ticket.
We're Universal. We operate
A retrospective Chances Module.

Nearly everyone's bought a ticket
In some lottery or another,
once at least. We buy up the files,
feed the names into our computer,
and see who the lucky person is.'
'Well, that's incredible' I said.
'It's marvellous. I still can't quite...
I'll believe it when I see the cheque.'

'Oh,' they said, 'there's no cheque.'
'But the money?' 'We don't deal in money.
Experiences are what we deal in.
You've had a great experience, right?
Exciting? Something you'll remember?
That's your prize. So congratulations
from all of us at Universal.
Have a nice day!' And the line went dead.

Wole

Wole Soyinka was born in 1934 in Nigeria. He was educated at the Universities of Ibadan and Leeds. Soyinka was a play reader at the Royal Court Theatre in London. He then returned to Nigeria where he worked in a variety of universities and produced and acted in his own plays. Soyinka was a political prisoner for two years, 1967-69. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986.

Soyinka's early poetry was mainly light satirical verse which is exemplified in the poem 'Telephone Conversation'. His later writing, however, became progressively more serious and, at times, bleak. Soyinka's work shows a fusion of African and European influences and a concern with freedom versus tyranny and life versus death. Soyinka is not only a poet, he is also a novelist and a playwright.

Wole Soyinka 1934-

Telephone Conversation

The price seemed reasonable, location
Indifferent. The landlady swore she lived
Off premises. Nothing remained
But self-confession. 'Madam,' I warned,
'I hate a wasted journey – I am African.'
Silence. Silenced transmission of
Pressurised good-breeding. Voice, when it came,
Lipstick coated, long gold-rolled
Cigarette-holder piped. Caught I was, foully.
'HOW DARK?'...I had not misheard...'ARE YOU LIGHT
OR VERY DARK?' Button B. Button A*. Stench
Of rancid breath of public hide-and-speak.
Red booth. Red pillar-box. Red double-tiered
Omnibus squelching tar. It was real! Shamed
By ill-mannered silence, surrender
Pushed dumbfoundment to beg simplification.
Considerate she was, varying the emphasis –
'ARE YOU DARK? OR VERY LIGHT?' Revelation came.
'You mean – like plain or milk chocolate?'
Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light
Impersonality. Rapidly, wave-length adjusted,
I chose. 'West African sepia' – and as afterthought,
'Down in my passport.' Silence for spectroscopic
Flight of fancy, till truthfulness clanged her accent
Hard on the mouthpiece. 'WHAT'S THAT?' conceding
'DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS.' 'Like brunette.'
'THAT'S DARK, ISN'T IT?' 'Not altogether.
Facially, I am brunette, but madam, you should see
The rest of me. Palm of my hand, soles of my feet
Are a peroxide blond. Friction, caused –

Foolishly, madam – by sitting down, has turned
My bottom raven black – One moment, madam!' - sensing
Her receiver rearing on the thunderclap
About my ears – 'Madam,' I pleaded, 'wouldn't you rather
See for yourself?'

**Buttons which had to be pressed when using a telephone in a public booth.
Such telephones are no longer in use.*

Grace

Grace Nichols was born in 1950 in Guyana. Nichols was educated at the University of Guyana and worked as a teacher, a reporter, Government information assistant and journalist before moving to England in 1977.

Nichols' first published collection of poetry was called 'I is a Long-Memored Woman' and it won the Commonwealth poetry prize in 1983. Nichols grew up using both Standard English and Creole and both are used in her poetry. As a result of this fusion much of the language in her poetry has a very fresh aspect about it. An important theme of her poetry is the slave experience and oppression particularly from women's perspectives. Nichols' poetry is also often quite lighthearted and very humorous.

Grace Nichols 1950-

Island Man

Morning
and island man wakes up
to the sound of blue surf
in his head
the steady breaking and wombing

wild seabirds
and fishermen pushing out to sea
the sun surfacing defiantly

from the east
of his small emerald island
he always comes back groggily groggily

Comes back to sands
of a grey metallic soar
to surge of wheels
to dull North Circular roar

muffling muffling
his crumpled pillow waves
island man heaves himself

Another London day

Carol Ann

Carol Ann Duffy was born in 1955 in Glasgow. Duffy was educated at a Convent school and later at Liverpool University. She grew up as a Catholic, attending church every Sunday and was also influenced by her father who was involved in the Labour Party.

At the age of sixteen she published a pamphlet of poems and then went on to publish other collections of poetry with small publishing houses such as Anvil Press. Duffy also wrote for the theatre and it could be said that her career was actually launched by two plays which were performed at the Liverpool Playhouse. Her poetry covers a wide range of topics but she is probably best known for her dramatic monologues which are highly regarded. Duffy has been presented with a number of poetry awards and is now considered to be one of Britain's leading living poets.

Carol Ann Duffy 1955-

War Photographer

In his darkroom he is finally alone
with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.
The only light is red and softly glows,
as though this were a church and he
a priest preparing to intone a Mass*.
Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays
beneath his hands which did not tremble then
though seem to now. Rural England. Home again
to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,
to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries
of this man's wife, how he sought approval
without words to do what someone must
and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black-and-white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement**. The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.
From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where
he earns his living and they do not care.

*A religious service

**A regular additional section placed in a Sunday newspaper

Simon

Simon Armitage was born in 1963 in West Yorkshire. He grew up there amidst the particular language and culture of that area. He has worked as a probation officer, a shelf stacker, a reviewer, poetry editor, BBC Radio broadcaster and is presently teaching at the University of Leeds and at the University of Iowa.

Armitage's poetry came to be noticed in his first book 'Zoom' which was published in 1989. This book was followed by 'Kid' in 1992 and 'Book of Matches' in 1993. Armitage's work is characterised by its energy and liveliness. He deals with subjects which others may not want to consider and he brings a certain forcefulness to his subjects. In 1992 he won the Forward Prize and in 1993 he was awarded the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award.

Simon Armitage 1963-

Poem

And if it snowed and snow covered the drive
he took a spade and tossed it to one side.
And always tucked his daughter up at night.
And slipped her the one time that she lied.

And every week he tipped up half his wage.
And what he didn't spend each week he saved.
And praised his wife for every meal she made.
And once, for laughing, punched her in the face.

And for his mum he hired a private nurse.
And every Sunday taxied her to church.
And he blubbed when she went from bad to worse.
And twice he lifted ten quid* from her purse.

Here's how they rated him when they looked back:
sometimes he did this, sometimes he did that.

**A slang term meaning pound sterling*

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