

GCE



CCEA GCE AS Support Material  
**English Literature**  
**POETRY ANTHOLOGY**

For use with the Specification for first teaching from Autumn 2016  
and first examination in Summer 2017

**ONLINE VERSION**

Issued: August 2016





# GCE AS ENGLISH LITERATURE

## Poetry Anthology

For use with the Specification for first teaching from Autumn 2016  
and first examination in Summer 2017  
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**ROBERT FROST*****INTO MY OWN***

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,  
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,  
Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,  
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

I should not be withheld but that some day  
Into their vastness I should steal away,  
Fearless of ever finding open land,  
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,  
Or those should not set forth upon my track  
To overtake me, who should miss me here  
And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew –  
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

*“The Road Not Taken,” “Desert Places,” “Acquainted with the Night,” “Into My Own,” “After Apple-Picking,” “Gathering Leaves,” “Mending Wall,” “Mowing,” “Going for Water,” “For Once, Then, Something,” “Birches,” and “Out, Out” from the book THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright © 1916, 1923, 1928, 1930, 1934, 1939, 1969 by Henry Holt and Company, copyright © 1936, 1944, 1951, 1956, 1958, 1962 by Robert Frost, copyright © 1964, 1967 by Lesley Frost Ballantine. Used by Permission of Henry Holt and Company, LLC. All rights reserved.*

## ROBERT FROST

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### *MOWING*

There was never a sound beside the wood but one,  
And that was my long scythe whispering to the ground.  
What was it it whispered? I knew not well myself;  
Perhaps it was something about the heat of the sun,  
Something, perhaps, about the lack of sound –  
And that was why it whispered and did not speak.  
It was no dream of the gift of idle hours,  
Or easy gold at the hand of fay or elf:  
Anything more than the truth would have seemed too weak  
To the earnest love that laid the swale in rows,  
Not without feeble-pointed spikes of flowers  
(Pale orchises), and scared a bright green snake.  
The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows.  
My long scythe whispered and left the hay to make.

## ***GOING FOR WATER***

The well was dry beside the door,  
And so we went with pail and can  
Across the fields behind the house  
To seek the brook if still it ran;

Not loth to have excuse to go,  
Because the autumn eve was fair  
(Though chill), because the fields were ours,  
And by the brook our woods were there.

We ran as if to meet the moon  
That slowly dawned behind the trees,  
The barren boughs without the leaves,  
Without the birds, without the breeze.

But once within the wood, we paused  
Like gnomes that hid us from the moon,  
Ready to run to hiding new  
With laughter when she found us soon.

Each laid on other a staying hand  
To listen ere we dared to look,  
And in the hush we joined to make  
We heard, we knew we heard the brook.

A note as from a single place,  
A slender tinkling fall that made  
Now drops that floated on the pool  
Like pearls, and now a silver blade.

## ROBERT FROST

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### *MENDING WALL*

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
There where it is we do not need the wall:  
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good  
neighbors."

## ***AFTER APPLE-PICKING***

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree  
 Toward heaven still,  
 And there's a barrel that I didn't fill  
 Beside it, and there may be two or three  
 Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.  
 But I am done with apple-picking now.  
 Essence of winter sleep is on the night,  
 The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.  
 I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
 I got from looking through a pane of glass  
 I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
 And held against the world of hoary grass.  
 It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
 But I was well  
 Upon my way to sleep before it fell,  
 And I could tell  
 What form my dreaming was about to take.  
 Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
 Stem end and blossom end,  
 And every fleck of russet showing clear.  
 My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
 It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
 I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.  
 And I keep hearing from the cellar bin  
 The rumbling sound  
 Of load on load of apples coming in.  
 For I have had too much  
 Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
 Of the great harvest I myself desired.  
 There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,  
 Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.  
 For all  
 That struck the earth,  
 No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,  
 Went surely to the cider-apple heap  
 As of no worth.

One can see what will trouble  
 This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.  
 Were he not gone,  
 The woodchuck could say whether it's like his  
 Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,  
 Or just some human sleep.

## ROBERT FROST

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### *THE ROAD NOT TAKEN*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that, the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

## ***BIRCHES***

When I see birches bend to left and right  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,  
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.  
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay  
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them  
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning  
After a rain. They click upon themselves  
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored  
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells  
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—  
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away  
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.  
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,  
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed  
So low for long, they never right themselves:  
You may see their trunks arching in the woods  
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground  
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair  
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.  
But I was going to say when Truth broke in  
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,  
I should prefer to have some boy bend them  
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—  
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,  
Whose only play was what he found himself,  
Summer or winter, and could play alone.  
One by one he subdued his father's trees  
By riding them down over and over again  
Until he took the stiffness out of them,  
And not one but hung limp, not one was left  
For him to conquer. He learned all there was  
To learn about not launching out too soon  
And so not carrying the tree away  
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise  
To the top branches, climbing carefully  
With the same pains you use to fill a cup  
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.  
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,

## ROBERT FROST

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Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.  
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.  
And so I dream of going back to be.  
It's when I'm weary of considerations,  
And life is too much like a pathless wood  
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs  
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping  
From a twig's having lashed across it open.  
I'd like to get away from earth awhile  
And then come back to it and begin over.  
May no fate willfully misunderstand me  
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away  
Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:  
I don't know where it's likely to go better.  
I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,  
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
*Toward* heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
But dipped its top and set me down again.  
That would be good both going and coming back.  
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.

## **“OUT, OUT –”**

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard  
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,  
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.  
And from there those that lifted eyes could count  
Five mountain ranges one behind the other  
Under the sunset far into Vermont.  
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,  
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.  
And nothing happened: day was all but done.  
Call it a day, I wish they might have said  
To please the boy by giving him the half hour  
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.  
His sister stood beside them in her apron  
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,  
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,  
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap –  
He must have given the hand. However it was,  
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!  
The boy's first outcry was a rueful laugh,  
As he swung toward them holding up the hand,  
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep  
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all –  
Since he was old enough to know, big boy  
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart –  
He saw all spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off –  
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"  
So. But the hand was gone already.  
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.  
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.  
And then – the watcher at his pulse took fright.  
No one believed. They listened at his heart.  
Little – less – nothing! – and that ended it.  
No more to build on there. And they, since they  
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

## ROBERT FROST

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### *FOR ONCE, THEN, SOMETHING*

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
Deeper down in the well than where the water  
Gives me back in a shining surface picture  
Me myself in the summer heaven, godlike,  
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.  
*Once*, when trying with chin against a well-curb,  
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
Something more of the depths – and then I lost it.  
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?  
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

## ***GATHERING LEAVES***

Spades take up leaves  
No better than spoons,  
And bags full of leaves  
Are light as balloons.

I make a great noise  
Of rustling all day  
Like rabbit and deer  
Running away.

But the mountains I raise  
Elude my embrace,  
Flowing over my arms  
And into my face.

I may load and unload  
Again and again  
Till I fill the whole shed,  
And what have I then?

Next to nothing for weight;  
And since they grew duller  
From contact with earth,  
Next to nothing for color.

Next to nothing for use.  
But a crop is a crop,  
And who's to say where  
The harvest shall stop?

## ROBERT FROST

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### *ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT*

I have been one acquainted with the night.  
I have walked out in rain – and back in rain.  
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.  
I have passed by the watchman on his beat  
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet  
When far away an interrupted cry  
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-by;  
And further still at an unearthly height  
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.  
I have been one acquainted with the night.

## *DESERT PLACES*

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast  
In a field I looked into going past,  
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,  
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it—it is theirs.  
All animals are smothered in their lairs.  
I am too absent-spirited to count;  
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is, that loneliness  
Will be more lonely ere it will be less—  
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow  
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces  
Between stars—on stars where no human race is.  
I have it in me so much nearer home  
To scare myself with my own desert places.

## SEAMUS HEANEY

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### *PERSONAL HELICON* for Michael Longley

As a child, they could not keep me from wells  
And old pumps with buckets and windlasses.  
I loved the dark drop, the trapped sky, the smells  
Of waterweed, fungus and dank moss.

One, in a brickyard, with a rotted board top.  
I savoured the rich crash when a bucket  
Plummeted down at the end of a rope.  
So deep you saw no reflection in it.

A shallow one under a dry stone ditch  
Fructified like any aquarium.  
When you dragged out long roots from the soft mulch  
A white face hovered over the bottom.

Others had echoes, gave back your own call  
With a clean new music in it. And one  
Was scaresome, for there, out of ferns and tall  
Foxgloves, a rat slapped across my reflection.

Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.

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## ***THE FORGE***

All I know is a door into the dark.  
Outside, old axles and iron hoops rusting;  
Inside, the hammered anvil's short-pitched ring,  
The unpredictable fantail of sparks  
Or hiss when a new shoe toughens in water.  
The anvil must be somewhere in the centre,  
Horned as a unicorn, at one end square,  
Set there immovable: an altar  
Where he expends himself in shape and music.  
Sometimes, leather-aproned, hairs in his nose,  
He leans out on the jamb, recalls a clatter  
Of hoofs where traffic is flashing in rows;  
Then grunts and goes in, with a slam and flick  
To beat real iron out, to work the bellows.

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## SEAMUS HEANEY

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### *THE PENINSULA*

When you have nothing more to say, just drive  
For a day all round the peninsula.  
The sky is tall as over a runway,  
The land without marks, so you will not arrive

But pass through, though always skirting landfall.  
At dusk, horizons drink down sea and hill,  
The ploughed field swallows the whitewashed gable  
And you're in the dark again. Now recall

The glazed foreshore and silhouetted log,  
That rock where breakers shredded into rags,  
The leggy birds stilted on their own legs,  
Islands riding themselves out into the fog,

And drive back home, still with nothing to say  
Except that now you will uncode all landscapes  
By this: things founded clean on their own shapes,  
Water and ground in their extremity.

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## ***THE WIFE'S TALE***

When I had spread it all on linen cloth  
 Under the hedge, I called them over.  
 The hum and gulp of the thresher ran down  
 And the big belt slewed to a standstill, straw  
 Hanging undelivered in the jaws.  
 There was such quiet that I heard their boots  
 Crunching the stubble twenty yards away.

He lay down and said, 'Give these fellows theirs,  
 I'm in no hurry,' plucking grass in handfuls  
 And tossing it in the air. 'That looks well.'  
 (He nodded at my white cloth on the grass.)  
 'I declare a woman could lay out a field  
 Though boys like us have little call for cloths.'  
 He winked, then watched me as I poured a cup  
 And buttered the thick slices that he likes.  
 'It's threshing better than I thought, and mind  
 It's good clean seed. Away over there and look.'  
 Always this inspection has to be made  
 Even when I don't know what to look for.

But I ran my hand in the half-filled bags  
 Hooked to the slots. It was hard as shot,  
 Innumerable and cool. The bags gaped  
 Where the chutes ran back to the stilled drum  
 And forks were stuck at angles in the ground  
 As javelins might mark lost battlefields.  
 I moved between them back across the stubble.

They lay in the ring of their own crusts and dregs  
 Smoking and saying nothing. 'There's good yield,  
 Isn't there?' – as proud as if he were the land itself –  
 'Enough for crushing and for sowing both.'  
 And that was it. I'd come and he had shown me,  
 So I belonged no further to the work.  
 I gathered cups and folded up the cloth  
 And went. But they still kept their ease,  
 Spread out, unbuttoned, grateful, under the trees.

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## SEAMUS HEANEY

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### ***BOGLAND*** *for T. P. Flanagan*

We have no prairies  
To slice a big sun at evening –  
Everywhere the eye concedes to  
Encroaching horizon,

Is wooed into the cyclops' eye  
Of a tarn. Our unfenced country  
Is bog that keeps crusting  
Between the sights of the sun.

They've taken the skeleton  
Of the Great Irish Elk  
Out of the peat, set it up,  
An astounding crate full of air.

Butter sunk under  
More than a hundred years  
Was recovered salty and white.  
The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years.  
They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks  
Of great firs, soft as pulp.  
Our pioneers keep striking  
Inwards and downwards,

Every layer they strip  
Seems camped on before.  
The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage.  
The wet centre is bottomless.

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## ***THE HARVEST BOW***

As you plaited the harvest bow  
 You implicated the mellowed silence in you  
 In wheat that does not rust  
 But brightens as it tightens twist by twist  
 Into a knowable corona,  
 A throwaway love-knot of straw.

Hands that aged round ashplants and cane sticks  
 And lapped the spurs on a lifetime of gamecocks  
 Harked to their gift and worked with fine intent  
 Until your fingers moved somnambulant:  
 I tell and finger it like braille,  
 Gleaning the unsaid off the palpable,

And if I spy into its golden loops  
 I see us walk between the railway slopes  
 Into an evening of long grass and midges,  
 Blue smoke straight up, old beds and ploughs in hedges,  
 An auction notice on an outhouse wall –  
 You with a harvest bow in your lapel,

Me with the fishing rod, already homesick  
 For the big lift of these evenings, as your stick  
 Whacking the tips off weeds and bushes  
 Beats out of time, and beats, but flushes  
 Nothing: that original townland  
 Still tongue-tied in the straw tied by your hand.

*The end of art is peace*  
 Could be the motto of this frail device  
 That I have pinned up on our deal dresser –  
 Like a drawn snare  
 Slipped lately by the spirit of the corn  
 Yet burnished by its passage, and still warm.

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## SEAMUS HEANEY

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### *THE RAILWAY CHILDREN*

When we climbed the slopes of the cutting  
We were eye-level with the white cups  
Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.

Like lovely freehand they curved for miles  
East and miles west beyond us, sagging  
Under their burden of swallows.

We were small and thought we knew nothing  
Worth knowing. We thought words travelled the wires  
In the shiny pouches of raindrops,

Each one seeded full with the light  
Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves  
So infinitesimally scaled

We could stream through the eye of a needle.

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## ***THE SUMMER OF LOST RACHEL***

Potato crops are flowering,  
     Hard green plums appear  
 On damson trees at your back door  
     And every berried briar

Is glittering and dripping  
     Whenever showers plout down  
 On flooded hay and flooding drills.  
     There's a ring around the moon.

The whole summer was waterlogged  
     Yet everyone is loath  
 To trust the rain's soft-soaping ways  
     And sentiments of growth

Because all confidence in summer's  
     Unstinting largesse  
 Broke down last May when we laid you out  
     In white, your whited face

Gashed from the accident, but still,  
     So absolutely still,  
 And the setting sun set merciless  
     And every merciful

Register inside us yearned  
     To run the film back,  
 For you to step into the road  
     Wheeling your bright-rimmed bike,

Safe and sound as usual,  
     Across, then down the lane,  
 The twisted spokes all straightened out,  
     The awful skid-marks gone.

But no. So let the downpours flood  
     Our memory's riverbed  
 Until, in thick-webbed currents,  
     The life you might have led

Wavers and tugs dreamily  
     As soft-plumed waterweed  
 Which tempts our gaze and quietens it  
     And recollects our need.

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## SEAMUS HEANEY

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### *POSTSCRIPT*

And some time make the time to drive out west  
Into County Clare, along the Flaggy Shore,  
In September or October, when the wind  
And the light are working off each other  
So that the ocean on one side is wild  
With foam and glitter, and inland among stones  
The surface of a slate-grey lake is lit  
By the earthed lightning of a flock of swans,  
Their feathers roughed and ruffling, white on white,  
Their fully grown headstrong-looking heads  
Tucked or cresting or busy underwater.  
Useless to think you'll park and capture it  
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

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## ***'HAD I NOT BEEN AWAKE'***

Had I not been awake I would have missed it,  
A wind that rose and whirled until the roof  
Pattered with quick leaves off the sycamore

And got me up, the whole of me a-patter,  
Alive and ticking like an electric fence:  
Had I not been awake I would have missed it,

It came and went so unexpectedly  
And almost it seemed dangerously,  
Returning like an animal to the house,

A courier blast that there and then  
Lapsed ordinary. But not ever  
After. And not now.

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## SEAMUS HEANEY

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### *THE CONWAY STEWART*

'Medium', 14-carat nib,  
Three gold bands in the clip-on screw-top,  
In the mottled barrel a spatulate, thin

Pump-action lever  
The shopkeeper  
Demonstrated,

The nib uncapped,  
Treating it to its first deep snorkel  
In a newly opened ink-bottle,

Guttery, snottery,  
Letting it rest then at an angle  
To ingest,

Giving us time  
To look together and away  
From our parting, due that evening,

To my longhand  
'Dear'  
To them, next day.

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## ***THE BALER***

All day the clunk of a baler  
Ongoing, cardiac-dull,  
So taken for granted

It was evening before I came to  
To what I was hearing  
And missing: summer's richest hours

As they had been to begin with,  
Fork-lifted, sweated-through  
And nearly rewarded enough

By the giddied-up race of a tractor  
At the end of the day  
Last-lapping a hayfield.

But what I also remembered  
As woodpigeons sued at the edge  
Of thirty gleaned acres

And I stood inhaling the cool  
In a dusk eldorado  
Of mighty cylindrical bales

Was Derek Hill's saying,  
The last time he sat at our table,  
He could bear no longer to watch

The sun going down  
And asking please to be put  
With his back to the window.

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## TED HUGHES

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### *THE THOUGHT-FOX*

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
Something else is alive  
Beside the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:  
Something more near  
Though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow  
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;  
Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow  
Between trees, and warily a lame  
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox  
It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

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## WIND

This house has been far out at sea all night,  
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,  
Winds stampeding the fields under the window  
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky  
The hills had new places, and wind wielded  
Blade-light, luminous black and emerald,  
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as  
The coal-house door. Once I looked up –  
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes  
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,  
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap:  
The wind flung a magpie away and a black-  
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note  
That any second would shatter it. Now deep  
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip  
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,  
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,  
Seeing the window tremble to come in,  
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

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## TED HUGHES

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### *HAWK ROOSTING*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## ***RELIC***

I found this jawbone at the sea's edge:  
There, crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers or tossed  
To flap for half an hour and turn to a crust  
Continue the beginning. The deeps are cold:  
In that darkness camaraderie does not hold;  
Nothing touches but, clutching, devours. And the jaws,  
Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose  
Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws  
Eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the beach:  
This is the sea's achievement; with shells,  
Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls.

Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these  
Indigestibles, the spars of purposes  
That failed far from the surface. None grow rich  
In the sea. This curved jawbone did not laugh  
But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph.

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## TED HUGHES

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### *PIKE*

Pike, three inches long, perfect  
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.  
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.  
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur  
Over a bed of emerald, silhouette  
Of submarine delicacy and horror.  
A hundred feet long in their world.

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads –  
Gloom of their stillness:  
Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.  
Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs  
Not to be changed at this date;  
A life subdued to its instrument;  
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

Three we kept behind glass,  
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,  
And four and a half: fed fry to them –  
Suddenly there were two. Finally one.

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.  
And indeed they spare nobody.  
Two, six pounds each, over two feet long,  
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb –

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:  
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks –  
The same iron in this eye  
Though its film shrank in death.

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,  
Whose lilies and muscular tench  
Had outlasted every visible stone  
Of the monastery that planted them –

Stilled legendary depth:  
It was as deep as England. It held  
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old  
That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished  
With the hair frozen on my head  
For what might move, for what eye might move.  
The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods  
Frail on my ear against the dream  
Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,  
That rose slowly towards me, watching.

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## ***FULL MOON AND LITTLE FRIEDA***

A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank of a  
bucket –

And you listening.  
A spider's web, tense for the dew's touch.  
A pail lifted, still and brimming – mirror  
To tempt a first star to a tremor.

Cows are going home in the lane there, looping the hedges with  
their warm wreaths of breath –  
A dark river of blood, many boulders,  
Balancing unspilled milk.

“Moon!” you cry suddenly, “Moon! Moon!”

The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing amazed at a work

That points at him amazed.

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## TED HUGHES

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### WODWO

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over  
Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge  
I enter water. What am I to split  
The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed  
Of the river above me upside down very clear  
What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find  
this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret  
interior and make it my own? Do these weeds  
know me and name me to each other have they  
seen me before, do I fit in their world? I seem  
separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped  
out of nothing casually I've no threads  
fastening me to anything I can go anywhere  
I seem to have been given the freedom  
of this place what am I then? And picking  
bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me  
no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it  
me and doing that have coincided very queerly  
But what shall I be called am I the first  
have I an owner what shape am I what  
shape am I am I huge if I go  
to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees  
till I get tired that's touching one wall of me  
for the moment if I sit still how everything  
stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre  
but there's all this what is it roots  
roots roots roots and here's the water  
again very queer but I'll go on looking

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## *LOVESONG*

He loved her and she loved him  
 His kisses sucked out her whole past and future or tried to  
 He had no other appetite  
 She bit him she gnawed him she sucked  
 She wanted him complete inside her  
 Safe and sure forever and ever  
 Their little cries fluttered into the curtains

Her eyes wanted nothing to get away  
 Her looks nailed down his hands his wrists his elbows  
 He gripped her hard so that life  
 Should not drag her from that moment  
 He wanted all future to cease  
 He wanted to topple with his arms round her  
 Off that moment's brink and into nothing  
 Or everlasting or whatever there was  
 Her embrace was an immense press  
 To print him into her bones  
 His smiles were the garrets of a fairy palace  
 Where the real world would never come  
 Her smiles were spider bites  
 So he would lie still till she felt hungry  
 His words were occupying armies  
 Her laughs were an assassin's attempts  
 His looks were bullets daggers of revenge  
 Her glances were ghosts in the corner with horrible secrets  
 His whispers were whips and jackboots  
 Her kisses were lawyers steadily writing  
 His caresses were the last hooks of a castaway  
 Her love-tricks were the grinding of locks  
 And their deep cries crawled over the floors  
 Like an animal dragging a great trap  
 His promises were the surgeon's gag  
 Her promises took the top off his skull  
 She would get a brooch made of it  
 His vows pulled out all her sinews  
 He showed her how to make a love-knot  
 Her vows put his eyes in formalin

At the back of her secret drawer  
 Their screams stuck in the wall

Their heads fell apart into sleep like the two halves  
 Of a lopped melon, but love is hard to stop

In their entwined sleep they exchanged arms and legs  
 In their dreams their brains took each other hostage

In the morning they wore each other's face

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## TED HUGHES

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### ***ROE-DEER***

In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year  
Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

They had happened into my dimension  
The moment I was arriving just there.

They planted their two or three years of secret deerhood  
Clear on my snow-screen vision of the abnormal

And hesitated in the all-way disintegration  
And stared at me. And so for some lasting seconds

I could think the deer were waiting for me  
To remember the password and sign

That the curtain had blown aside for a moment  
And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor the  
road a road

The deer had come for me.

Then they ducked through the hedge, and upright they  
rode their legs  
Away downhill over a snow-lonely field

Towards tree dark – finally  
Seeming to eddy and glide and fly away up

Into the boil of big flakes.  
The snow took them and soon their nearby hoofprints as  
well

Revising its dawn inspiration  
Back to the ordinary.

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## ***CROW SICKENED***

His illness was something could not vomit him up.

Unwinding the world like a ball of wool  
Found the last end tied round his own finger.

Decided to get death, but whatever  
Walked into his ambush  
Was always his own body.

Where is this somebody who has me under?

He dived, he journeyed, challenging, climbed and with a glare

Of hair on end finally met fear.

His eyes sealed up with shock, refusing to see.

With all his strength he struck. He felt the blow.

Horrified, he fell.

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## TED HUGHES

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## SYLVIA PLATH

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### *SHEEP IN FOG*

The hills step off into whiteness.  
People or stars  
Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.

The train leaves a line of breath.  
O slow  
Horse the colour of rust,

Hooves, dolorous bells—  
All morning the  
Morning has been blackening,

A flower left out.  
My bones hold a stillness, the far  
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten  
To let me through to a heaven  
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

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*LADY LAZARUS*

I have done it again.  
 One year in every ten  
 I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
 Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
 My right foot

A paperweight,  
 My face a featureless, fine  
 Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin  
 O my enemy.  
 Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?  
 The sour breath  
 Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh  
 The grave cave ate will be  
 At home on me

And I a smiling woman.  
 I am only thirty.  
 And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.  
 What a trash  
 To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.  
 The peanut-crunching crowd  
 Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—  
 The big strip tease.  
 Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands  
 My knees.  
 I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.  
 The first time it happened I was ten.  
 It was an accident.

The second time I meant  
 To last it out and not come back at all.  
 I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
 They had to call and call  
 And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying  
 Is an art, like everything else.  
 I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.  
 I do it so it feels real.  
 I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
 It's easy enough to do it and stay put.  
 It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day  
 To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
 Amused shout:

'A miracle!'  
 That knocks me out.  
 There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
 For the hearing of my heart—  
 It really goes.

## SYLVIA PLATH

---

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.  
So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

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## *TULIPS*

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.  
Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in.  
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly  
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.  
I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.  
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses  
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff  
Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.  
Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.  
The nurses pass and pass, they are no trouble,  
They pass the way gulls pass inland in their white caps,  
Doing things with their hands, one just the same as another,  
So it is impossible to tell how many there are.

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water  
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.  
They bring me numbness in their bright needles, they bring  
me sleep.  
Now I have lost myself I am sick of baggage—  
My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,  
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;  
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat  
Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.  
They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.  
Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley  
I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books  
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.  
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted  
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
How free it is, you have no idea how free—  
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,  
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.  
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them  
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

## SYLVIA PLATH

---

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.  
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe  
Lightly, through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.  
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.  
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,  
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their colour,  
A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck.

Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.  
The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me  
Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins,  
And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow  
Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,  
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.  
The vivid tulips eat my oxygen.

Before they came the air was calm enough,  
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.  
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.  
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river  
Snags and eddies round a sunken rust-red engine.  
They concentrate my attention, that was happy  
Playing and resting without committing itself.

The walls, also, seem to be warming themselves.  
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;  
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat,  
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes  
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.  
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,  
And comes from a country far away as health.

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## *THE NIGHT DANCES*

A smile fell in the grass.  
Irretrievable!

And how will your night dances  
Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Such pure leaps and spirals—  
Surely they travel

The world forever, I shall not entirely  
Sit emptied of beauties, the gift

Of your small breath, the drenched grass  
Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.

Their flesh bears no relation.  
Cold folds of ego, the calla,

And the tiger, embellishing itself—  
Spots, and a spread of hot petals.

The comets  
Have such a space to cross,

Such coldness, forgetfulness.  
So your gestures flake off—

Warm and human, then their pink light  
Bleeding and peeling

Through the black amnesias of heaven.  
Why am I given

These lamps, these planets  
Falling like blessings, like flakes

Six-sided, white  
On my eyes, my lips, my hair

Touching and melting.  
Nowhere.

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## SYLVIA PLATH

---

### *ARIEL*

Stasis in darkness.  
Then the substanceless blue  
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,  
How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees! – The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to  
The brown arc  
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye  
Berries cast dark  
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,  
Shadows.  
Something else

Hauls me through air—  
Thighs, hair;  
Flakes from my heels.

White  
Godiva, I unpeel—  
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I  
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.  
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.  
And I  
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

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***DADDY***

You do not do, you do not do  
 Any more, black shoe  
 In which I have lived like a foot  
 For thirty years, poor and white,  
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.  
 You died before I had time—  
 Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
 Ghastly statue with one grey toe  
 Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
 Where it pours bean green over blue  
 In the waters off beautiful Nauset.  
 I used to pray to recover you.  
 Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town  
 Scraped flat by the roller  
 Of wars, wars, wars.  
 But the name of the town is common.  
 My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.  
 So I never could tell where you  
 Put your foot, your root,  
 I never could talk to you.  
 The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
 I could hardly speak.  
 I thought every German was you.  
 And the language obscene

An engine, an engine  
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.  
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.  
 I began to talk like a Jew.  
 I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna  
 Are not very pure or true.  
 With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck  
 And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack  
 I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of *you*,  
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.  
 And your neat moustache  
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.  
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika  
 So black no sky could squeak through.  
 Every woman adores a Fascist,  
 The boot in the face, the brute  
 Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
 In the picture I have of you,  
 A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
 But no less a devil for that, no not  
 Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.  
 I was ten when they buried you.  
 At twenty I tried to die  
 And get back, back, back to you.  
 I thought even the bones would do.

## SYLVIA PLATH

---

But they pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.  
And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
And I said I do, I do.  
So daddy, I'm finally through.  
The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year,  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always *knew* it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

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## ***THE ARRIVAL OF THE BEE BOX***

I ordered this, this clean wood box  
 Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.  
 I would say it was the coffin of a midget  
 Or a square baby  
 Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.  
 I have to live with it overnight  
 And I can't keep away from it.  
 There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.  
 There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.  
 It is dark, dark,  
 With the swarmy feeling of African hands  
 Minute and shrunk for export,  
 Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?  
 It is the noise that appals me most of all,  
 The unintelligible syllables.  
 It is like a Roman mob,  
 Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.  
 I am not a Caesar.  
 I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.  
 They can be sent back.  
 They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.

I wonder how hungry they are.  
 I wonder if they would forget me  
 If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.  
 There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,  
 And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately  
 In my moon suit and funeral veil.  
 I am no source of honey  
 So why should they turn on me?  
 Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.

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## SYLVIA PLATH

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### *POPPIES IN JULY*

Little poppies, little hell flames,  
Do you do no harm?

You flicker. I cannot touch you.  
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.

And it exhausts me to watch you  
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.  
Little bloody skirts!

There are fumes that I cannot touch.  
Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?

If I could bleed, or sleep!—  
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,  
Dulling and stilling.

But colourless. Colourless.

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## ***CONTUSION***

Colour floods to the spot, dull purple.  
The rest of the body is all washed out,  
The colour of pearl.

In a pit of rock  
The sea sucks obsessively,  
One hollow the whole sea's pivot.

The size of a fly,  
The doom mark  
Crawls down the wall.

The heart shuts,  
The sea slides back,  
The mirrors are sheeted.

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## SYLVIA PLATH

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### *MIRROR*

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 a 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.

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## ***THE COLOSSUS***

I shall never get you put together entirely,  
 Pieced, glued and properly jointed.  
 Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles  
 Proceed from your great lips.  
 It's worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
 Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.  
 Thirty years now I have labored  
 To dredge the silt from your throat.  
 I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol  
 I crawl like an ant in mourning  
 Over the weedy acres of your brow  
 To mend the immense skull-plates and clear  
 The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

A blue sky out of the Oresteia  
 Arches above us. O father, all by yourself  
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.  
 I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.  
 Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their old anarchy to the horizon-line.  
 It would take more than a lightning-stroke  
 To create such a ruin.  
 Nights, I squat in the cornucopia  
 Of your left ear, out of the wind,

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.  
 The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.  
 My hours are married to shadow.  
 No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel  
 On the blank stones of the landing.

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## SYLVIA PLATH

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### *BLACKBERRYING*

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,  
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,  
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea  
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries  
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes  
Ebon in the hedges, fat  
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.  
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.  
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening  
their sides.

Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—  
Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.  
Theirs is the only voice, protesting, protesting.  
I do not think the sea will appear at all.  
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.  
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,  
Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in  
a Chinese screen.  
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe  
in heaven.  
One more hook, and the berries and bushes end.

The only thing to come now is the sea.  
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,  
Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.  
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.  
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me  
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock  
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space  
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths  
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

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One Flesh

## PHILIP LARKIN

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### *CHURCH GOING*

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new –  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort or other will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these – for which was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

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## PHILIP LARKIN

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### *LOVE SONGS IN AGE*

She kept her songs, they took so little space,  
    The covers pleased her:  
One bleached from lying in a sunny place,  
One marked in circles by a vase of water,  
One mended, when a tidy fit had seized her,  
    And coloured, by her daughter –  
So they had waited, till in widowhood  
She found them, looking for something else, and stood

Relearning how each frank submissive chord  
    Had ushered in  
Word after sprawling hyphenated word,  
And the unfailing sense of being young  
Spread out like a spring-woken tree, wherein  
    That hidden freshness, sung,  
That certainty of time laid up in store  
As when she played them first. But, even more,

The glare of that much-mentioned brilliance, love,  
    Broke out, to show  
Its bright incipience sailing above,  
Still promising to solve, and satisfy,  
And set unchangeably in order. So  
    To pile them back, to cry,  
Was hard, without lamely admitting how  
It had not done so then, and could not now.

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## ***FAITH HEALING***

Slowly the women file to where he stands  
 Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair,  
 Dark suit, white collar. Stewards tirelessly  
 Persuade them onwards to his voice and hands,  
 Within whose warm spring rain of loving care  
 Each dwells some twenty seconds. *Now, dear child,*  
*What's wrong*, the deep American voice demands,  
 And, scarcely pausing, goes into a prayer  
 Directing God about this eye, that knee.  
 Their heads are clasped abruptly; then, exiled

Like losing thoughts, they go in silence; some  
 Sheepishly stray, not back into their lives  
 Just yet; but some stay stiff, twitching and loud  
 With deep hoarse tears, as if a kind of dumb  
 And idiot child within them still survives  
 To re-awake at kindness, thinking a voice  
 At last calls them alone, that hands have come  
 To lift and lighten; and such joy arrives  
 Their thick tongues blort, their eyes squeeze grief, a crowd  
 Of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice –

What's wrong! Moustached in flowered frocks they shake:  
 By now, all's wrong. In everyone there sleeps  
 A sense of life lived according to love.  
 To some it means the difference they could make  
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps  
 As all they might have done had they been loved.  
 That nothing cures. An immense slackening ache,  
 As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,  
 Spreads slowly through them – that, and the voice above  
 Saying *Dear child*, and all time has disproved.

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### *FOR SIDNEY BECHET*

That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes  
Like New Orleans reflected on the water,  
And in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes,

Building for some a legendary Quarter  
Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles,  
Everyone making love and going shares –

Oh, play that thing! Mute glorious Storyvilles  
Others may license, grouping round their chairs  
Sporting-house girls like circus tigers (priced

Far above rubies) to pretend their fads,  
While scholars *manqués* nod around unnoticed  
Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids.

On me your voice falls as they say love should,  
Like an enormous yes. My Crescent City  
Is where your speech alone is understood,

And greeted as the natural noise of good,  
Scattering long-haired grief and scored pity.

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## THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:  
     Not till about  
 One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday  
 Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,  
 All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense  
 Of being in a hurry gone. We ran  
 Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street  
 Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence  
 The river's level drifting breadth began,  
 Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept  
     For miles inland,  
 A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.  
 Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and  
 Canals with floatings of industrial froth;  
 A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped  
 And rose: and now and then a smell of grass  
 Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth  
 Until the next town, new and nondescript,  
 Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

At first, I didn't notice what a noise  
     The weddings made  
 Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys  
 The interest of what's happening in the shade,  
 And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls  
 I took for porters larking with the mails,  
 And went on reading. Once we started, though,  
 We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls  
 In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,  
 All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event  
     Waving goodbye  
 To something that survived it. Struck, I leant  
 More promptly out next time, more curiously,  
 And saw it all again in different terms:  
 The fathers with broad belts under their suits

And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;  
 An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,  
 The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,  
 The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

    Yes, from cafés  
 And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed  
 Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days  
 Were coming to an end. All down the line  
 Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;  
 The last confetti and advice were thrown,  
 And, as we moved, each face seemed to define  
 Just what it saw departing: children frowned  
 At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;  
     The women shared  
 The secret like a happy funeral;  
 While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared  
 At a religious wounding. Free at last,  
 And loaded with the sum of all they saw,  
 We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.  
 Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast  
 Long shadows over major roads, and for  
 Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say

*I nearly died,*

A dozen marriages got under way.  
 They watched the landscape, sitting side by side  
 - An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,  
 And someone running up to bowl – and none  
 Thought of the others they would never meet  
 Or how their lives would all contain this hour.  
 I thought of London spread out in the sun,  
 Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:

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There we were aimed. And as we raced across  
    Bright knots of rail  
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss  
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail  
Travelling coincidence; and what it held  
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power  
That being changed can give. We slowed again,  
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled  
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

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## ***TALKING IN BED***

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,  
Lying together there goes back so far,  
An emblem of two people being honest.

Yet more and more time passes silently.  
Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest  
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.  
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why  
At this unique distance from isolation

It becomes still more difficult to find  
Words at once true and kind,  
Or not untrue and not unkind.

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### *DOCKERY AND SON*

'Dockery was junior to you,  
Wasn't he?' said the Dean. 'His son's here now.'  
Death-suited, visitant, I nod. 'And do  
You keep in touch with –' Or remember how  
Black-gowned, unbreakfasted, and still half-tight  
We used to stand before that desk, to give  
'Our version' of 'these incidents last night'?  
I try the door of where I used to live:

Locked. The lawn spreads dazzlingly wide.  
A known bell chimes. I catch my train, ignored.  
Canal and clouds and colleges subside  
Slowly from view. But Dockery, good Lord,  
Anyone up today must have been born  
In '43, when I was twenty-one.  
If he was younger, did he get this son  
At nineteen, twenty? Was he that withdrawn

High-collared public-schoolboy, sharing rooms  
With Cartwright who was killed? Well, it just shows  
How much...How little...Yawning, I suppose  
I fell asleep, waking at the fumes  
And furnace-glazes of Sheffield, where I changed,  
And ate an awful pie, and walked along  
The platform to its end to see the ranged  
Joining and parting lines reflect a strong

Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife,  
No house or land still seemed quite natural.  
Only a numbness registered the shock  
Of finding out how much had gone of life,  
How widely from the others. Dockery, now:  
Only nineteen, he must have taken stock  
Of what he wanted, and been capable  
Of...No, that's not the difference: rather, how

Convinced he was he should be added to!  
Why did he think adding meant increase?  
To me it was dilution. Where do these  
Innate assumptions come from? Not from what  
We think truest, or most want to do:  
Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style  
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,  
Suddenly they harden into all we've got

And how we got it; looked back on, they rear  
Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying  
For Dockery a son, for me nothing,  
Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.  
Life is first boredom, then fear.  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age, and then the only end of age.

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### *AUBADE*

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 anaesthetic 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.

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### *HIGH WINDOWS*

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

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

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

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

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

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## ***THE OLD FOOLS***

What do they think has happened, the old fools,  
 To make them like this? Do they somehow suppose  
 It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools,  
 And you keep on pissing yourself, and can't remember  
 Who called this morning? Or that, if they only chose,  
 They could alter things back to when they danced all night,  
 Or went to their wedding, or sloped arms some September?  
 Or do they fancy there's really been no change,  
 And they've always behaved as if they were crippled or tight,  
 Or sat through days of thin continuous dreaming  
 Watching light move? If they don't (and they can't), it's strange:  
     Why aren't they screaming?

At death, you break up: the bits that were you  
 Start speeding away from each other for ever  
 With no one to see. It's only oblivion, true:  
 We had it before, but then it was going to end,  
 And was all the time merging with a unique endeavour  
 To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower  
 Of being here. Next time you can't pretend  
 There'll be anything else. And these are the first signs:  
 Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power  
 Of choosing gone. Their looks show that they're for it:  
 Ash hair, toad hands, prune face dried into lines –  
     How can they ignore it?

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms  
 Inside your head, and people in them, acting.  
 People you know, yet can't quite name; each looms  
 Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning,  
 Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting  
 A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only  
 The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,  
 The blown bush at the window, or the sun's  
 Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely  
 Rain-ceased midsummer evening. That is where they live:  
 Not here and now, but where all happened once.  
     This is why they give

## PHILIP LARKIN

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An air of baffled absence, trying to be there  
Yet being here. For the rooms grow farther, leaving  
Incompetent cold, the constant wear and tear  
Of taken breath, and them crouching below  
Extinction's alp, the old fools, never perceiving  
How near it is. This must be what keeps them quiet:  
The peak that stays in view wherever we go  
For them is rising ground. Can they never tell  
What is dragging them back, and how it will end? Not at night?  
Not when the strangers come? Never, throughout  
The whole hideous inverted childhood? Well,  
    We shall find out.

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## ***SOLAR***

Suspended lion face  
Spilling at the centre  
Of an unfurnished sky  
How still you stand,  
And how unaided  
Single stalkless flower  
You pour unrecompensed.

The eye sees you  
Simplified by distance  
Into an origin,  
Your petalled head of flames  
Continuously exploding.  
Heat is the echo of your  
Gold.

Coined there among  
Lonely horizontals  
You exist openly.  
Our needs hourly  
Climb and return like angels.  
Unclosing like a hand,  
You give for ever.

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## PHILIP LARKIN

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### *THE EXPLOSION*

On the day of the explosion  
Shadows pointed towards the pithead:  
In the sun the slagheap slept.

Down the lane came men in pitboots  
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke,  
Shouldering off the freshened silence.

One chased after rabbits; lost them;  
Came back with a nest of lark's eggs;  
Showed them; lodged them in the grasses.

So they passed in beards and moleskins,  
Fathers, brothers, nicknames, laughter,  
Through the tall gates standing open.

At noon, there came a tremor; cows  
Stopped chewing for a second; sun,  
Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed.

*The dead go on before us, they  
Are sitting in God's house in comfort,  
We shall see them face to face –*

Plain as lettering in the chapels  
It was said, and for a second  
Wives saw men of the explosion

Larger than in life they managed –  
Gold as on a coin, or walking  
Somehow from the sun towards them,

One showing the eggs unbroken.

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**EAVAN BOLAND*****ODE TO SUBURBIA***

Six o'clock: the kitchen bulbs which blister  
 Your dark, your housewives starting to nose  
 Out each other's day, the claustrophobia  
 Of your back gardens varicose  
 With shrubs make an ugly sister  
 Of you suburbia.

How long ago did the glass in your windows subtly  
 Silver into mirrors which again  
 And again show the same woman  
 Shriek at a child, which multiply  
 A dish, a brush, ash,  
 The gape of a fish

In the kitchen, the gape of a child in the cot?  
 You swelled so that when you tried  
 The silver slipper on your foot  
 It pinched your instep and the common  
 Hurt which touched you made  
 You human.

No creatures of your streets will feel the touch  
 Of a wand turning the wet sinews  
 Of fruit suddenly to a coach,  
 While this rat without leather reins  
 Or a whip or britches continues  
 Sliming your drains.

No magic here. Yet you encroach until  
 The shy countryside, fooled  
 By your plainness falls, then rises  
 From your bed changed, schooled  
 Forever by your skill,  
 Your compromises.

Midnight and your metamorphosis  
 Is now complete, although the mind  
 Which spinstered you might still miss  
 Your mystery now, might still fail  
 To see your powers defined  
 By this detail:

By this creature drowsing now in every house,  
 The same lion who tore stripes  
 Once off zebras, who now sleeps  
 Small beside the coals and may  
 On a red letter day  
 Catch a mouse.

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## EAVAN BOLAND

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### *ANOREXIC*

Flesh is heretic.  
My body is a witch.  
I am burning it.

Yes I am torching  
her curves and paps and wiles.  
They scorch in my self denials.

How she meshed my head  
in the half-truths  
of her fevers

till I renounced  
milk and honey  
and the taste of lunch.

I vomited  
her hungers.  
Now the bitch is burning.

I am starved and curveless.  
I am skin and bone.  
She has learned her lesson.

Thin as a rib  
I turn in sleep.  
My dreams probe

a claustrophobia  
a sensuous enclosure.  
How warm it was and wide

once by a warm drum,  
once by the song of his breath  
and in his sleeping side.

Only a little more,  
only a few more days  
sinless, foodless.

I will slip  
back into him again  
as if I have never been away.

Caged so  
I will grow  
angular and holy

past pain  
keeping his heart  
such company

as will make me forget  
in a small space  
the fall

into forked dark,  
into python needs  
heaving to hips and breasts  
and lips and heat  
and sweat and fat and greed.

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## THE JOURNEY

### *For Elizabeth Ryle*

*Immediately cries were heard. These were the loud wailing of infant souls weeping at the very entrance-way; never had they had their share of life's sweetness for the dark day had stolen them from their mothers' breasts and plunged them to a death before their time.*

*Virgil, The Aeneid, Book VI*

And then the dark fell and 'there has never'  
I said 'been a poem to an antibiotic:  
never a word to compare with the odes on  
the flower of the raw sloe for fever

'or the devious Africa-seeking tern  
or the protein treasures of the sea-bed.  
Depend on it, somewhere a poet is wasting  
his sweet uncluttered metres on the obvious

'emblem instead of the real thing.  
Instead of sulphur we shall have hyssop dipped  
in the wild blood of the unblemished lamb,  
so every day the language gets less

'for the task and we are less with the language.'  
I finished speaking and the anger faded  
and dark fell and the book beside me  
lay open at the page Aphrodite

comforts Sappho in her love's duress.  
The poplars shifted their music in the garden,  
a child startled in a dream,  
my room was a mess –

the usual hardcovers, half-finished cups,  
clothes piled up on an old chair –  
and I was listening out but in my head was  
a loosening and sweetening heaviness,

not sleep, but nearly sleep, not dreaming really  
but as ready to believe and still  
unfevered, calm and unsurprised  
when she came and stood beside me

and I would have known her anywhere  
and I would have gone with her anywhere  
and she came wordlessly  
and without a word I went with her

down down down without so much as  
ever touching down but always, always  
with a sense of mulch beneath us  
the way of stairs winding down to a river

and as we went on the light went on  
failing and I looked sideways to be certain  
it was she, misshapen, musical –  
Sappho – the scholiast's nightingale

and down we went, again down  
until we came to a sudden rest  
beside a river in what seemed to be  
an oppressive suburb of the dawn.

My eyes got slowly used to the bad light.  
At first I saw shadows, only shadows.  
Then I could make out women and children  
and, in the way they were, the grace of love.

## EAVAN BOLAND

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'Cholera, typhus, croup, diphtheria'  
she said, 'in those days they racketed  
in every backstreet and alley of old Europe.  
Behold the children of the plague.'

Then to my horror I could see to each  
nipple some had clipped a limpet shape –  
suckling darkneses – while others had their arms  
weighed down, making terrible pietàs.

She took my sleeve and said to me, 'be careful.  
Do not define these women by their work:  
not as washerwomen trussed in dust and sweating,  
muscling water into linen by the river's edge

'nor as court ladies brailled in silk  
on wool and woven with an ivory unicorn  
and hung, nor as laundresses tossing cotton,  
brisking daylight with lavender and gossip.

'But these are women who went out like you  
when dusk became a dark sweet with leaves,  
recovering the day, stooping, picking up  
teddy bears and rag dolls and tricycles and buckets –

'love's archaeology – and they too like you  
stood boot deep in flowers once in summer  
or saw winter come in with a single magpie  
in a caul of haws, a solo harlequin'.

I stood fixed. I could not reach or speak to them.  
Between us was the melancholy river,  
the dream water, the narcotic crossing  
and they had passed over it, its cold persuasions.

I whispered, 'let me be  
let me at least be their witness,' but she said  
'what you have seen is beyond speech,  
beyond song, only not beyond love;

'remember it, you will remember it'  
and I heard her say but she was fading fast  
as we emerged under the stars of heaven,  
'there are not many of us; you are dear

'and stand beside me as my own daughter.  
I have brought you here so you will know forever  
the silences in which are our beginnings,  
in which we have an origin like water,'

and the wind shifted and the window clasp  
opened, banged and I woke up to find  
the poetry books stacked higgledy piggledy,  
my skirt spread out where I had laid it

nothing was changed; nothing was more clear  
but it was wet and the year was late.  
The rain was grief in arrears; my children  
slept the last dark out safely and I wept.

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## EAVAN BOLAND

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### *THIS MOMENT*

A neighbourhood.

At dusk.

Things are getting ready  
to happen  
out of sight.

Stars and moths.  
And rinds slanting around fruit.

But not yet.

One tree is black.  
One window is yellow as butter.

A woman leans down to catch a child  
who has run into her arms  
this moment.

Stars rise.  
Moths flutter.  
Apples sweeten in the dark.

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## LOVE

Dark falls on this mid-western town  
 where we once lived when myths collided.  
 Dusk has hidden the bridge in the river  
 which slides and deepens  
 to become the water  
 the hero crossed on his way to hell.

Not far from here is our old apartment.  
 We had a kitchen and an Amish table.  
 We had a view. And we discovered there  
 love had the feather and muscle of wings  
 and had come to live with us,  
 a brother of fire and air.

We had two infant children one of whom  
 was touched by death in this town  
 and spared: and when the hero  
 was hailed by his comrades in hell  
 their mouths opened and their voices failed and  
 there is no knowing what they would have asked  
 about a life they had shared and lost.

I am your wife.  
 It was years ago.  
 Our child is healed. We love each other still.  
 Across our day-to-day and ordinary distances  
 we speak plainly. We hear each other clearly.

And yet I want to return to you  
 on the bridge of the Iowa river as you were,  
 with snow on the shoulders of your coat  
 and a car passing with its headlights on:

I see you as a hero in a text –  
 the image blazing and the edges gilded –  
 and I long to cry out the epic question  
 my dear companion:

Will we ever live so intensely again?  
 Will love come to us again and be  
 so formidable at rest it offered us ascension  
 even to look at him?

But the words are shadows and you cannot hear me.  
 You walk away and I cannot follow.

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## EAVAN BOLAND

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### *WITNESS*

Here is the city –  
its worn-down mountains,  
its grass and iron,  
its smoky coast  
seen from the high roads  
on the Wicklow side.

From Dalkey Island  
to the North Wall,  
to the blue distance seizing its perimeter,  
its old divisions are deep within it.

And in me also.  
And always will be:

Out of my mouth they come.  
The spurred and booted garrisons.  
The men and women  
they dispossessed.

What is a colony  
if not the brutal truth  
that when we speak  
the graves open.  
And the dead walk?

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## ***HOW WE MADE A NEW ART ON OLD GROUND***

A famous battle happened in this valley.  
    You never understood the nature poem.  
Till now. Till this moment – if these statements  
    seem separate, unrelated, follow this

silence to its edge and you will hear  
    the history of air: the crispness of a fern  
or the upward cut and turn around of  
    a fieldfare or thrush written on it.

The other history is silent: the estuary  
    is over there. The issue was decided here:  
Two kings prepared to give no quarter.  
    Then one king and one dead tradition.

Now the humid dusk, the old wounds  
    wait for language, for a different truth.  
When you see the silk of the willow  
    and the wider edge of the river turn

and grow dark and then darker, then  
    you will know that the nature poem  
is not the action nor its end: it is  
    this rust on the gate beside the trees, on

the cattle grid underneath our feet,  
    on the steering wheel shaft: it is  
an aftermath, an overlay and even, in  
    its own modest way, an art of peace:

I try the word *distance* and it fills with  
    sycamores, a summer's worth of pollen.  
And as I write *valley* straw, metal  
    blood, oaths, armour are unwritten.

Silence spreads slowly from these words  
    to those ilex trees half in, half out  
of shadows falling on the shallow ford  
    of the south bank beside Yellow island



## ***IS IT STILL THE SAME***

young woman who climbs the stairs,  
who closes a child's door,  
who goes to her table  
in a room at the back of a house?  
The same unlighted corridor?  
The same night air  
over the wheelbarrows and rain-tanks?  
The same inky sky and pin-bright stars?  
You can see nothing of her, but her head  
bent over the page, her hand moving,  
moving again, and her hair.  
I wrote like that once.  
But this is different.  
This time, when she looks up, I will be there.

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## EAVAN BOLAND

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### *AND SOUL*

My mother died one summer –  
the wettest in the records of the state.  
Crops rotted in the west.  
Checked tablecloths dissolved in back gardens.  
Empty deckchairs collected rain.  
As I took my way to her  
through traffic, through lilacs dripping blackly  
behind houses  
and on curbsides, to pay her  
the last tribute of a daughter, I thought of something  
I remembered  
I heard once, that the body is, or is  
said to be, almost all  
water and as I turned southward, that ours is  
a city of it,  
one in which  
every single day the elements begin  
a journey towards each other that will never,  
given our weather,  
fail –  
the ocean visible in the edges cut by it,  
cloud colour reaching into air,  
the Liffey storing one and summoning the other,  
salt greeting the lack of it at the North Wall and,  
as if that wasn't enough, all of it  
ending up almost every evening  
inside our speech –  
*coast canal ocean river stream* and now  
*mother* and I drove on and although  
the mind is unreliable in grief, at  
the next cloudburst, it almost seemed  
they could be shades of each other,  
the way the body is  
of every one of them and now  
they were on the move again – fog into mist,  
mist into sea spray and both into the oily glaze  
that lay on the railings of  
the house she was dying in  
as I went inside.

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## ***CITYSCAPE***

I have a word for it –  
the way the surface waited all day  
to be a silvery pause between sky and city –  
which is *elver*.

And another one for how  
the bay shelved cirrus clouds  
piled up at the edge of the Irish Sea,  
which is *elver* too.

The old Blackrock baths  
have been neglected now for fifty years,  
fine cracks in the tiles  
visible as they never were when

*I can I can I can*  
shouted Harry Vernon as  
he dived from the highest board  
curving down into salt and urine,

his cry fading out  
through the half century it took  
to hear as a child a glass eel  
had been seen

entering the sea-water baths at twilight –  
also known as *elver* –  
and immediately  
the word begins

a delicate migration –  
a fine crazing healing in the tiles –  
the sky deepening above a city  
that has always been

unsettled between sluice gates and the Irish Sea  
to which there now comes at dusk  
a translucent visitor  
yearning for the estuary.

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## EAVAN BOLAND

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### *AMETHYST BEADS*

And when I take them out of  
the cherrywood box these beads are  
the colour of dog-violets in shadow. Then  
at the well of the throat where  
tears start  
they darken. Now I wear at my neck an old stress  
of crystal: an impression of earthly housekeeping.  
A mysterious brightness  
made underground where there is no sun  
only stories of a strayed child and her mother bargaining  
with a sullen king. Promising and arguing:  
what she can keep, what she can let him have. Shadows  
and the season violets start up in are part of  
the settlement. Stolen from such a place  
these beads cannot be anything  
but wise to the healing arts of compromise,  
of survival. And when I wear them it is almost  
as if my skin was taking into itself  
a medicine of light. Something like the old simples.  
Rosemary, say, or tansy. Or camomile  
which they kept to cool fever.  
Which they once used to soothe a child  
tossing from side to side, beads of sweat catching  
and holding a gleam from the vigil lamp.  
A child crying out in her sleep  
*Wait for me. Don't leave me here.*  
Who will never remember this.  
Who will never remember this.

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***BREAKING THE SURFACE***

I have gone beyond the childish delight  
of plumping the heaviest stone  
into the shallows, and yet,  
distance throwing has defeated me.

Head bowed, I clamber the scree of the shore  
filling my pockets with its loose change  
– each cool button of basalt  
tentatively flipped before selection.

*This* is my talent – a whiplash from the hip,  
the skite, innumerable tangents, then a glide  
until, as if remembering the laws of gravity,  
it stops and languidly slews before anchoring.

*One facet of the art of skimming, I say  
is that, by overriding the big splash,  
sound release is reduced to a whispering skiff  
thus reinforcing the attenuated decay of energy...*

I take it, from your broadening grin,  
that no amount of gilding with applied physics  
can disguise pure panache *or* my primitive desire  
to rearrange the shoreline – in a minimalist sort of way.

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## JEAN BLEAKNEY

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### *NIGHTSCAPES*

*If this was Donegal  
I wouldn't be able to breathe  
for fear of swallowing stars...*

Tonight, summer thunderclouds  
are bloomed sandstone pink  
– city-lit to saturation;

etched with high silhouettes  
– the fretwork of ash leaflets;  
the blurred filigree of birch;

*Lonicera nitida* (Poor Man's Box)  
– its swell of uncut hedge  
could be a distant ancient forest.

Below the horizon of hedges,  
beyond the quiescence of chromatophores  
– a sudden symmetry of white.

I'm standing in a bowl of galaxies  
with floating moons of Cosmos 'Purity'  
And Magellanic Clouds of Artemesia.

In spangled panicles of privet  
I count thirty-seven Pleiades  
but not a single Pole Star.

Night moths are time-travellers  
sampling a trillion vintages  
of nectar, dusting aeons.

Here in the sub-night of cities  
we shape our own mysteries;  
Cast our own constellations.

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## ***OUT TO TENDER*** **CEASEFIRE, 1994**

All along the motorway  
they're resurfacing and bridge-strengthening  
and seeding the central reservation  
with wild flowers.

But only an hour or so ahead  
there is fierce growth in the ditches  
and the road diminishes  
to unmendable potholes.

And there are places where the light  
suddenly drops; where the branches,  
out of reach of the hedgecutter,  
are irrevocably pleached.

\*\*\*

The whole talk these days is about words;  
the glitzy newly-honed nouns  
– like *peace* and *process* and *permanence*.

But there are other things to be said  
with reference to particular definitions  
and in deference to the vernacular.

There are townlands where parameters  
invariably decline to perimeters;  
where you can't be middle-of-the-road  
when you're the whole road.

Here come the cowboy landscapers  
with their quick-fix Castlewellan Golds.  
As an old Fermanagh woman would've said,  
*The same boys can do feats and shite wonders.*

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## JEAN BLEAKNEY

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### *HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT?*

I am your wife.  
I can name and nurture  
twenty-nine hardy geraniums.  
I know that the secret of not ironing  
is tumbling to the point  
where gravity and steam  
conjoin to creaselessness.  
I know that cholesterol  
gets a bad press considering  
it is to sex hormones  
what flour is to bread.  
I think that low-salt  
is also very suspect.  
I know that in life,  
there are no straight lines—  
it's all angles and loops.  
I know that colour  
is the effluent of light;  
that greenery is only thus  
because reds and blues  
are all a leaf desires.  
On very windy nights  
I am struck by the suddenness  
of disappearing moonlight.  
I have always thought  
that infinity cuts both ways...  
I am *your* wife.  
How can you say that my head  
'is full of sweetie mice'?

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## ***SPRING***

It spills from sun-shocked evenings in March  
and slit seed-packets, buckled into spouts.  
She palms and strokes and shunts them, via heart-line;  
index-fingers them to rows of labelled pots.

They germinate too soon, of course, too soon  
a forest of green pins excites the kitchen.  
From there, it's nightly shuffles to the greenhouse  
and freezing hands that reek of paraffin.

When light allows, she separates each seedling  
– barely gripped by thumb and fingertip.  
She teases root from root and then re-anchors  
their tresses of translucent brittle silks.

The longest month of all is fickle April:  
whittled down to digging-weeding days  
of riddling soil and fretting over bindweed.  
How old, she thinks, her hands become, clay-crazed.

Some afternoon in May, the planting over,  
she walks the garden, dazed by sudden heat.  
She lifts her head and stares at the horizon  
as if awakening to some old grief...

Don't ask her about daffodils or tulips,  
or whether lilac bloomed. She won't have seen  
the Honesty that flared in neighbours' gardens  
nor the tentative new growth on evergreens.

Have pity on her. Now that June's arrived,  
there's sadness in a weather-beaten dreamer  
who sleepwalks with her hands outstretched. She's spent  
the better part of spring divining summer.

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## JEAN BLEAKNEY

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### *A WATERY CITY*

CORK, JUNE 1996

Well if I'd known how many bridges there were in that city  
I'd have worried for your soul and I'd never have written  
*Hope the prose is flowing as effortlessly as the Lee*  
if I'd considered the sea. I hadn't reckoned on reversible rivers.

But there you were, moon-attuned and berthed between bridges  
– girder bridges and carboniferous limestone bridges  
stapling street to street. We walked them all, that afternoon  
or so it seemed; admired the cheery pastel housefronts,  
and grander, bare facades of limestone with an occasional  
blush of pink sandstone. We even eyed up steeples  
and one particularly incongruous church roof. The plants  
were wonderful of course. I knew they would be –  
so many tender shrubs in bloom. But the weeds  
(old walls alive with clematis and toadflax  
– even the *weeds* were exotic) made me realise  
just how far I'd come.

Then something happened.

We had food, I think; some poetry; some drink  
and then (this bit's quite strange) a mist came down  
and (weirder) we were suddenly afloat.  
(Where did that boat come from anyway?)  
And just as quick, the sky turned cobalt blue.  
The swell was worrying, but oh the view.  
All the *Physical Geography of Coasts* I ever knew  
came crashing back. Promontories. Arches. Stacks.  
There were cliffs on either side, rough-hewn and veined  
with schisty glitter. It was some kind of narrows,  
but where was it? We scoured the map (the tourist one  
you'd lent me, just in case...) and saw, almost off the edge  
and barely legible, as reticent as contour lines — *Desire Straits*.  
Alone and oarless, not a buoy in sight, we drifted  
mercifully past the rocks towards a crescent beach.

We both managed to graze something or other  
clambering out in the shallows. But glad, we were,  
of land: a south-facing strand, ripple-creased

and etched with sandpiper scribbles; studded  
with shells and tiny stones around the water-line;  
and further back – beyond seaweed and bleached branches –  
diving underground at rocks and peripheral shingle.  
We separated, each to our own surveys – as if expert  
in geology et cetera (the books were all at home).  
There were doom-black rocks, epic with lichens.  
You headed straight for those. I hunkered down  
among the fleshy sunset tints of cowrie shells.  
An hour passed, or maybe two, before the rendezvous  
– a huge ‘tabletop’ of red granite solidly propped  
on three short pillars of basalt. I pronounced it an ‘erratic’.  
You preferred to think of it as a squat dolmen.  
Anyway, we emptied our pockets of shells and putative fossils  
and as-yet-unnamed wild flowers in squashed bouquets.  
There was some discussion about tinctures ... or was it  
plate tectonics? Hunger caught us then, and wonder ...  
When to push the boat back out – high tide?  
Maps were one thing, tide-tables were something else.  
We were clueless. Would time and tide wait for *us*?

That’s when I lost the gist (again!)  
Those rollers of sliceable mist came back  
and blanked the whole thing out; and as it lifted,  
I saw that our erratic-cum-squat-dolmen  
had darkened and mellowed to mahogany. Somebody  
was calling *Time!* You were looking at your watch.  
And me? I was wondering, among other things ...  
how a whole ocean could have evaporated and why  
a non-swimmer like me was suddenly longing for the sea;  
lonely for even the slightest glimpse of water.  
But then you spoke; and looking down, I saw the ice  
melting in the glass, the ice melting ...

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## JEAN BLEAKNEY

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### *SELF-PORTRAITS WITH MEASURING TAPE*

#### *ON BEING SHORT-FINGERED*

As if to prove the point of hands like these  
that can't hold down a chord, nor span the keys,  
I've taken to carrying mugs in threes –

per hand, that is – four at the very most,  
brimful, and, far be it from me to boast,  
I even balance marmaladed toast

across their rims. If Mum saw me she'd say  
*For goodness sake! Haven't you got a tray!*  
as if it was idleness or horseplay.

This step-by-scald reminder not to trip  
is something more, I think, than showmanship:  
I need to feel I haven't lost my grip.

#### *COMING TO TERMS*

I'd never dwelt on my peculiar gait  
– a slightly to-fro swagger; the way  
I can't seem to push a wheelbarrow straight.

But these days of being able to buy  
size 14 short-length trousers off the peg  
(UK size) I'm having to think about why

there's always the same discrepancy  
– one hem rubbing a shoelace, the other  
hugging an anklebone. And just lately

sifting through the biscuit tins of photos  
(I've been meaning to sort them out for years.  
Why so many beaches, flowers and rainbows

and unbelievable sunsets?) I find  
my stance is feet apart and one knee bent  
as if countering some imagined incline.

It's unbalancing, this having to admit  
that one leg's shorter than the other.  
Somewhere along the line, I've learned to tilt

against the grain; I've learned to subcontract  
shortcomings. It's a safety net of sorts:  
I don't look down, and try not to look back.

### ***LIGHTNESS OF STEP IN SEPTEMBER***

I hate buying shoes. But this morning,  
with back-to-school business all done,  
a heady desire for newness  
is fuelled by late summer sun.

I check out the autumn-range *Eccos*  
in sixes, my usual size.  
But even the manager ventures  
'They're far too big. Here, try a five'.

No shoehorn required. I'm delighted.  
They're serious, supple and neat.  
I scribble my signature; think of the years  
I've misrepresented my feet.

I'm suddenly high on the notion  
that just round the corner there sits  
a bra that delivers without digging in;  
or a flattering hat that fits.

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## JEAN BLEAKNEY

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### *DONEGAL SIGHTINGS*

#### *NO MATTER WHAT THE FORECAST SAYS*

You would need three weather eyes  
out here on Dawros Head where the sky,  
Atlantic laden, signals its intentions  
in airbrushed cliffs and disappearing islands;  
where a distant nick of blue can suddenly  
balloon and winch the tourist to the beach,  
might even make him contemplate  
the grassy-cambered drive to Dooey Strand.  
But then again, the wind might change,  
the day might rearrange its whole barometry.  
You would need three weather eyes,  
and a pothole eye – for the sake of the chassis.

#### *SUNSET AT TRAMORE, ROSBEG*

Looking down from the dunes at the distant straggler  
idling back along the sublittoral  
whose head is about to be silhouetted against  
the lava-red sun, whose paddling feet are about to enter  
the river of fire that flows from it,  
I'm tempted to shout, Cassandra-like, against the roar  
*Watch out! Either you'll burn or the tide'll turn!*  
But then the midges descend. By the time I've distractedly...  
shells, driftwood, jellyfish, a headless seal (or is it?) ...  
by the time I've arrived at the waterline,  
he's gone. So have his footsteps. So has the sun.

## OFF SEASON

Clouds above Gweebarra Bay disgorge themselves  
 in charcoal smudges and truncated rainbows.  
 The wave-whipped peaty run-off is precipitating  
 – a dirty foam that blows between rocks like snow  
 and spins along the strand like tumbleweed.  
 Tiny jellyfish coagulate along the staggered tide-line.  
 Against a slaty sky, the high bogland glows  
 in rusts and salmon pinks, almost as though  
 summer sunsets were condensed for overwintering.  
 The last wind-stricken leaves are flocculating  
 in hedgerow ditches. This churned-up landscape  
 is an overloaded watercolour, where only blue,  
 or the memory of it, is true to its own element.

## APOLOGY

*To the ringed plovers of Rosbeg  
 whom I mistakenly identified as sanderlings  
 and wrote a poem for, entitled 'Sanderlings' ...*

I misinterpreted your clockwork legs;  
 misheard your musical *too-i, queep, queec!*  
 All summer, as I measured out the strand,  
 my footsteps triggering your reprimand,  
 I read it as a game of hide-and-seek.

But autumn finds you focused, less aware  
 of presences. Instead, you're weather-braced.  
 I'm close enough to name, but still outpaced.  
 Then, suddenly, you lift. What floods my stare  
 is all the songbirds I have ever known  
 who've sensed my saunterings, and flown.

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### *CSONTVÁRY'S FLOWERS*

*after the paintings of Csontváry (1853-1919), Csontváry Museum, Pécs*

*Tivadar Kosztká, later known as Csontváry, was a Hungarian pharmacist who decided, aged forty, he would become 'the greatest plein-air painter in the world, greater than Raphael'. Disregarded during his lifetime, his work is now accepted as that of a visionary genius.*

*View of Selmecebánya (1902)*

The thin ribbon of sky, and thinner still,  
blued hints of the easterly Carpathians  
then down into the whole arboretum of blue-greens and greens  
closing in around the valley town of Selmecebánya  
sweeping back up to this, the artist's perch.  
He must have been as high up as that distant baroque Calvary.  
It crowns a volcanic plug: as proud of the town  
as a city burgher, with its fur collar of forest,  
wearing, like a chain, its stations of the cross.  
Below, the solid civic buildings and church turrets,  
the narrow winding streets and jumble of roofs,  
then, up towards the rim, the barely glimpsed farmhouses  
floating in a froth of greens and indecipherable blossom.  
Then up this steep grassy bank – even the goats  
seem at risk of unbalancing – to a foreground pastoral:  
an orange grove and a hatted farmer with his scythe  
(scything *what*, exactly?) at the edge of a path  
beside an unbelievably leaning orange tree; at a remove  
from this sky-mirroring ribbon of cornfield. Here,  
four industrious women with billhook, rake and twine;  
and (it is assumed) Csontváry who, having painted them,  
looked at his palette and (one imagines) suddenly recognised  
the colours of cornfield flowers and borrowed –  
from the red for a skirt, and the blue for a blouse and the white  
for aprons and bodices – and improvised, like a spillage,  
a patch of poppies and cornflowers (or is it chicory?)  
and ox-eye daisies, around the feet of the women.  
They seem so content and focused, oblivious  
to the dizzying slope behind them; the bowl of their town  
dissolving into green; the staring Calvary; the capital E  
etched on a faraway mountain. What will they make of *that*  
when they turn for home, those flower-seeding women,  
that renegade man who is dreamily scything the air?

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## NOTES FOR THE ALMANAC

### *January Neglect*

No bird table. No breadcrumb windowsills  
nor bags of nuts, nor suet blocks. No frills.  
Just 'run to seed'. But here's a winged *mêlée*  
to improvise a seasonal buffet.

### *After the Comet*

The sense of orientation,  
that's what I'll miss: stargazing  
with the safety net of knowing  
where the sun is.

### *Lighting-Up Time in Belfast*

It's Umbrageville here; even *lights* are inclined  
to look daggers. Each sodium streetlamp is blind  
to the shadows it casts. From dusk to daybreak,  
it glares at the shadows that other lights make.

### *The Wettest Summer on Record*

Even a weather eye is shocked to find  
how raindrop, rose and sun have countersigned  
an August day that's suddenly in profit –  
the garden chimes with light; prisms of it.

### *Garden Plants*

Plucked from homelands, sent by land and sea  
to Kew (and such) and named and bred to order.  
By day they smile, by night they sigh the *c'est la vie*  
and *que sera, sera* of *Lingua Flora*.

### *Unfinished Limerick*

I was hoping that summer would bring  
an autumnal reversal of spring;  
that winter would burn  
and you would return...

### *December Holly*

The best berries in years  
can't be relied on:  
there, one day; the next,  
blackbirded. Gone.

### *Resignation*

I'm happiest in falling snow  
or spring's sharp scythe. I love the slow  
ablutions of October mizzle.  
Summer is for other people.

### *Dance Class for Snowflakes*

So many eager pupils! Here they come!  
Today, the waltz and polka: Johann Strauss.  
I'm air-conducting at the kitchen window:  
*Blue Danube*, as a warm-up; then *Die Fledermaus!*

### *Outlook*

GRIM, my dear. The lows are rolling in.  
I think I need a script for penicillin.  
You're for the sticks??? Well, it all presages  
days of rain and *Vick*, and No New Messages.

### *Trust*

Gardeners who use the future tense.  
Astronomers in rain. The sense  
that blades of grass, foot felled, spring back.  
The purchase of next year's almanac.

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## JEAN BLEAKNEY

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### *CONSOLIDATION*

*for Stephen and Katherine*

Some sunny, empty afternoon  
I'll pool our decade's worth  
and more of cowrie shells  
gathered from that gravel patch  
on Inniskeel and stowed, undated,  
in jars, wine glasses, bowls, tins,  
sandwich boxes, sandwich bags,  
shorts' pockets and car boot recesses ...

now that none of us remembers  
which year, who found the biggest,  
the smallest, whether the day  
was balmy, or mizzly, or windswept;  
whether we were bucketless, shoeless;  
if there were jellyfish, a sloop at anchor;  
whether we went beyond and braved  
nettles, thistles and cowpats  
to turn pilgrim among  
church ruins and rudimentary angels  
carved on grave slabs; whether  
– heads down like crazed prospectors –  
we left it almost too late  
to beat the tide ...

They are the unstrung beads  
of a frayed timeline, and if  
on a visit home you find me  
sitting at the conservatory table  
school ruler in hand, arranging  
rank on rank of cowrie shells  
now by size, now by colour  
– a flesh to grey spectrum –  
looking for the point at which  
warmth gives way to ashen  
(I think I'll leave a gap there),  
don't think me too maudlin.  
It is simply a nod towards

jigsaws and crosswords past,  
to redd-ups and redd-outs.

For these emblems of integrity  
– survivors of swell and storm –  
can surely bear the weight  
of symbolism, metaphor,  
memory and this rejoinder,  
this late thought: only from  
disorder can order be harvested.

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## WINTERISATION

Halloween at the caravan.  
 All along the strand  
 sand is rearing up  
 like smoke from a bush fire.  
 Somebody else's roof  
 has peeled back as if  
 yanked by a ring pull.  
 Ann's lying across hers  
 applying something black  
 from a 5L can that shifts  
 with each gust, as does  
 the ladder. A clatter  
 brings Ernie to the rescue.  
 Otherwise he's on his knees,  
 bad hip or no bad hip,  
 with power screwdriver,  
 a box of screws, glue  
 and a clamp or two;  
 tightening home the cladding  
 that woke them last night  
 as it slapped against the frame.  
 Next, last season's tape  
 is stripped off the air vents.  
 Turps. New tape applied.  
 One day more, they reckon,  
 Ann lowering the whirly line,  
 Ernie snagging on marram  
 with Richard's strimmer.  
 Rain. They retire inside,  
 newly leak-proofed.  
 I'm in the next door van;  
 a newer model, less in need  
 or so I tell myself,  
 who should be overalled  
 and stretched out underneath,  
 working old engine oil  
 into the rusting spars.  
 Instead, I'm folding up

papers and a laptop,  
 smoothing out the old  
 to-do list for departures.  
 Every year I seem to leave  
 more of myself behind  
 – as if body or soul  
 could face into winter  
 and survive this shore  
 (or even rehearse survival).  
 Open fridge door.  
 Dump rubbish.  
 Turn off gas and water.  
 Drain the system.  
 Cut insulating tape  
 to seal the keyhole.  
 Make sure the robin  
 hasn't zipped in again.  
 No histrionics, little bird!  
 Thus begins, bright thing,  
 a season of goodbyes.

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INVESTORS  
IN PEOPLE

