Best Words

Post-1914 Collection

Poetry is “the best words in the best order”
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Long Distance  Tony Harrison (born 1937)

Though my mother was already two years dead
Dad kept her slippers warming by the gas,
put hot water bottles her side of the bed
and still went to renew her transport pass.

You couldn't just drop in. You had to phone.
He'd put you off an hour to give him time
to clear away her things and look alone
as though his still raw love were such a crime.

He couldn't risk my blight of disbelief
though sure that very soon he'd hear her key
scrape in the rusted lock and end his grief.
He knew she'd just popped out to get the tea.

I believe life ends with death, and that is all.
You haven't both gone shopping; just the same,
in my new black leather phone book there's your name
and the disconnected number I still call.
In school I learned that one and one made two,
It could have been engraved in stone,
An absolute I could not question or refute.
But at home, sweet home, that sum was open to dispute -
In that raw cocoon of parental hate is where
I learned that one and one stayed one and one.
What's more, because all that household's anger and its pain
Stung more than any teacher's cane
I came to believe how it was best
That one remained one,
For by becoming two, one at least would suffer so.

Believing this I threw away so many gifts -
I never let love stay long enough to take root,
But by thinking myself of too little worth
I crushed all its messengers.

I grew - or did not grow -
And kept my head down low,
And drifted with the crowd,
One among the many whose dreams of flight
Weighed down the soul,
And kept it down,
Because to the flightless
The dream of flight's an anguish.

I stayed apart, stayed one,
Claiming separateness was out of choice,
And at every wedding ceremony I saw
The shadow of that albatross - divorce -
Fall over groom and bride,
And I took small comfort in believing that, to some degree
They too still harboured dreams of flying free.

I was wrong of course,
Just as those who brought me up were wrong.
It's absurd to believe all others are as damaged as ourselves,
And however late on, I am better off for knowing now
That given love, by taking love all can in time refute
The lesson that our parents taught,
And in their sick equation not stay caught.
I Shall Return

Claude McKay (1881-1948)

I shall return again; I shall return
To laugh and love and watch with wonder-eyes
At golden noon the forest fires burn,
Wafting their blue-black smoke to sapphire skies.
I shall return to loiter by the streams
That bathe the brown blades of the bending grasses,
And realize once more my thousand dreams
Of waters rushing down the mountain passes.
I shall return to hear the fiddle and fife
Of village dances, dear delicious tunes
That stir the hidden depths of native life,
Stray melodies of dim remembered runes.
I shall return, I shall return again,
To ease my mind of long, long years of pain.
Blackberrying
Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

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.
Their 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.
Churning Day  Seamus Heaney (born 1939)

A thick crust, coarse-grained as limestone rough-cast, hardened gradually on top of the four crocks that stood, large pottery bombs, in the small pantry. After the hot brewery of gland, cud and udder, cool porous earthenware fermented the butter milk for churning day, when the hooped churn was scoured with plumping kettles and the busy scrubber echoed daintily on the seasoned wood. It stood then, purified, on the flagged kitchen floor.

Out came the four crocks, spilled their heavy lip of cream, their white insides, into the sterile churn. The staff, like a great whiskey muddler fashioned in deal wood, was plunged in, the lid fitted. My mother took first turn, set up rhythms that, slug and thumped for hours. Arms ached. Hands blistered. Cheeks and clothes were spattered with flabby milk.

Where finally gold flecks began to dance. They poured hot water then, sterilized a birchwood bowl and little corrugated butter-spades. Their short stroke quickened, suddenly a yellow curd was weighting the churned-up white, heavy and rich, coagulated sunlight that they fished, dripping, in a wide tin strainer, heaped up like gilded gravel in the bowl.

The house would stink long after churning day, acrid as a sulphur mine. The empty crocks were ranged along the wall again, the butter in soft printed slabs was piled on pantry shelves. And in the house we moved with gravid ease, our brains turned crystals full of clean deal churns, the plash and gurgle of the sour-breathed milk, the pat and slap of small spades on wet lumps.
War Photographer
Carol Ann Duffy (born 1955)

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

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

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

A hundred agonies in black-and-white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears between bath and pre-lunch beers.
From aeroplane he stares impassively at where
he earns a living and they do not care.
Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings 
and some are treasured for their markings--
they cause the eyes to melt 
or the body to shriek without pain.

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

Mist is when the sky is tired of flight 
and rests its soft machine on the ground:
then the world is dim and bookish 
like engravings under tissue paper.

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

Model T is a room with the lock inside -- 
a key is turned to free the world 
for movement, so quick there is a film 
to watch for anything missed.

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

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

If the ghost cries, they carry it 
to their lips and soothe it to sleep 
with sounds. And yet, they wake it up 
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.

Only the young are allowed to suffer 
openly. Adults go to a punishment room 
with water but nothing to eat. 
They lock the door and suffer the noises 
alone. No one is exempt 
and everyone's pain has a different smell.

At night, when all the colours die, 
they hide in pairs 
and read about themselves - 
in colour, with their eyelids shut.
Bedtime Story

George Macbeth (1932-1992)

Long long ago when the world was a wild place
Planted with bushes and peopled by apes, our
Mission Brigade was at work in the jungle
   Hard by the Congo

Once, when a foraging detail was active;
Scouting for green-fly, it came on a grey man, the
Last living man, in the branch of a baobab
   Stalking a monkey.

Earlier men had disposed of, for pleasure,
Creatures whose names we scarcely remember—;
Zebra, rhinoceros, elephants, wart-hog,
   Lion, rats, deer. But

After the wars had extinguished the cities
Only the wild ones were left, half-naked
Near the Equator: and here was the last one,
   Starved for a monkey.

By then the Mission Brigade had encountered
Hundreds of such men: and their procedure,
History tells us, was only to feed them:
   Find them and feed them,

Those were the orders. And this was the last one.
Nobody knew that he was, but he was. Mud
Caked on his flat grey flanks. He was crouched, half-
   armed with a shaved spear

Glinting beneath broad leaves. When their jaws cut
Swathes through the bark and he saw fine teeth shine,
Round eyes roll round and forked arms waver
   Huge as the rough trunks.

Over his head, he was frightened. Our workers
Marched through the Congo before he was born, but
This was the first time perhaps that he'd seen one
   Staring in hot still
An Advancement of Learning Seamus Heaney (born 1939)

I took the embankment path
(As always deferring
The bridge). The river nosed past,
Pliable, oil-skinned, wearing

A transfer of gables and sky.
Hunched over the railing,
Well away from the road now, I
Considered the dirty-keeled swans.

Something slobbered curtly, close,
Smudging the silence: a rat
Slimed out of the water and
My throat thickened so quickly that

I turned down the path in cold sweat
But God, another was nimbling
Up the far bank, tracing its wet
Arcs on the stones, Incredibly then

I established a dreaded
Bridgehead. I turned to stare
With deliberate, thrilled care
At my hitherto snubbed rodent.

He clockworked aimlessly a while,
Stopped, back bunched and glistening,
Ears plastered down on his knobbled skull,
Insidiously listening.

The tapered tail that followed him,
The raindrop eye, the old snout:
One by one I took all in.
He trained on me, I stared him out

Forgetting how I used to panic
When his grey brothers scraped and fed
Behind the hen-coop in our yard,
On ceiling boards above my bed.

This terror, cold, wet-furred, small-clawed,
Retreated up a pipe of sewage.
I stared a minute after him.
Then I walked on and crossed the bridge.
Once Upon A Time
Gabriel Okara (born 1921)

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

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

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

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

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

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

So show me, son,
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
Once upon a time when I was like you.
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.
My Grandmother  Elizabeth Jennings (born 1926)

She kept an antique shop - or it kept her.  
Among Apostle spoons and Bristol glass,  
The faded silks, the heavy furniture,  
She watched her own reflection in the brass  
Salvers and silver bowls, as if to prove  
Polish was all, there was no need of love.

And I remember how I once refused  
To go out with her, since I was afraid.  
It was perhaps a wish not to be used  
Like antique objects. Though she never said  
That she was hurt, I still could feel the guilt  
Of that refusal, guessing how she felt.

Later, too frail to keep a shop, she put  
All her best things in one narrow room.  
The place smelt old, of things too long kept shut,  
The smell of absences where shadows come  
That can't be polished. There was nothing then  
To give her own reflection back again.

And when she died I felt no grief at all,  
Only the guilt of what I once refused.  
I walked into her room among the tall  
Sideboards and cupboards - things she never used  
But needed; and no finger marks were there,  
Only the new dust falling through the air.
Afternoons Philip Larkin (1922 - 1985)

Summer is fading:
The leaves fall in ones and twos
From trees bordering
The new recreation ground.
In the hollows of afternoons
Young mothers assemble
At swing and sandpit
Setting free their children.

Behind them, at intervals,
Stand husbands in skilled trades,
An estateful of washing,
And the albums, lettered
Our Wedding, lying
Near the television:
Before them, the wind
Is ruining their courting-places

That are still courting-places
(But the lovers are all in school),
And their children, so intent on
Finding more unripe acorns,
Expect to be taken home.
Their beauty has thickened.
Something is pushing them
To the side of their own lives.
The Road Not Taken

Robert Frost (1874 - 1963)

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, 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 travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Ballad Of The Bread Man

Charles Causley (born 1917)

Mary stood in the kitchen
Baking a loaf of bread.
An angel flew in the window
'We've a job for you,' he said.

'God in his big gold heaven
Sitting in his big blue chair,
Wanted a mother for his little son.
Suddenly saw you there.'

Mary shook and trembled,
'It isn't true what you say.'
'Don't say that,' said the angel.
'The baby's on its way.'

Joseph was in the workshop
Planing a piece of wood.
'The old man's past it,' the neighbours said.
'That girls been up to no good.'

The things they said about Gabriel
Were hardly fit to hear.
Mary never answered,
Mary never replied.
She kept the information,
Like the baby, safe inside.

It was the election winter.
They went to vote in the town.
When Mary found her time had come
The hotels let her down.

The baby was born in an annexe
Next to the local pub.
At midnight, a delegation
Turned up from the Farmers' club.

They talked about an explosion
That made a hole on the sky,
Said they'd been sent to the Lamb and Flag
To see God come down from on high.

A few days later a bishop
And a five-star general were seen
With the head of an African country
In a bullet-proof limousine.

'We've come,' they said 'with tokens
For the little boy to choose.'
Told the tale about war and peace
In the television news.

After them came the soldiers
With rifle and bombs and gun,
Looking for enemies of the state.
The family had packed up and gone.

When they got back to the village
The neighbours said, to a man,
'That boy will never be one of us,
Though he does what he blessed well can.'

He went round to all the people
A paper crown on his head.
Here is some bread from my father.
Take, eat, he said.

Nobody seemed very hungry.
Nobody seemed to care.
Nobody saw the God in himself
Quietly standing there.

He finished up in the papers.
He came to a very bad end.
He was charged with bringing the living to life.
No man was that prisoner's friend.

There's only one kind of punishment
To fit that kind of crime.
They riged a trial and shot him dead.
They were only just in time.

They lifted the young man by the leg,
Thy lifted him by the arm,
They locked him in a cathedral
In case he came to harm.

They stored him safe as water
Under seven rocks.
One Sunday morning he burst out
Like a jack-in-the-box.

Through the town he went walking.
He showed them the holes in his head.
Now do you want any loaves? He cried.
'Not today' they said.
Roe-Deer  Ted Hughes (1930 - 1998)

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 for some lasting seconds

I could think the deer were waiting for me
To remember a password or a 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.

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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