

Nature

To the Nile

SON of the old moon-mountains African!
Chief of the Pyramid and Crocodile!
We call thee fruitful, and that very while,
A desert fills our seeing's inward span;
Nurse of swart nations since the world began,
Art thou so fruitful? Or dost thou beguile
Such men to honour thee, who, worn with toil,
Rest for a space 'twixt Cairo and Decan?
O may dark fancies err! They surely do;
'Tis ignorance that makes a barren waste
Of all beyond itself, thou dost bedew
Green rushes like our rivers, and dost taste
The pleasant sun-rise, green isles hast thou too,
And to the sea as happily dost haste.

John Keats

A Bird Came Down the Walk

A bird came down the walk:
He did not know I saw;
He bit an angle-worm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw.

And then he drank a dew
From a convenient grass,
And then hopped sidewise to the wall
To let a beetle pass.

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all abroad
They looked like frightened beads, I thought;
He stirred his velvet head

Like one in danger; cautious,
I offered him a crumb,
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home

Than oars divide the ocean,
Too silver for a seam,
Or butterflies, off banks of noon,
Leap, plashless, as they swim.

Emily Dickinson

The Eagle

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Alfred Lord Tennyson

To the Evening Star

THOU fair-hair'd angel of the evening,
Now, whilst the sun rests on the mountains, light
Thy bright torch of love; thy radiant crown
Put on, and smile upon our evening bed!
Smile on our loves, and while thou drawest the
Blue curtains of the sky, scatter thy silver dew
On every flower that shuts its sweet eyes
In timely sleep. Let thy west wind sleep on
The lake; speak silence with thy glimmering eyes,
And wash the dusk with silver. Soon, full soon,
Dost thou withdraw; then the wolf rages wide,
And then the lion glares through the dun forest:
The fleeces of our flocks are cover'd with
Thy sacred dew: protect them with thine influence!

William Blake

Conflict

War is Kind

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind
Because your lover threw wild hands towards the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone
Do not weep
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment
Little souls who thirst for fight
These men were born to drill and die
The unexplained glory flies above them
Great is the battle god, great, and his kingdom

A field where a thousand corpses lie.
Do not weep babe, for war is kind
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches
Raged at his breast, gulped and died.
Do not weep
War is kind.

Swift blazing flag of the regiment
Eagle with crest of red and gold
These men were born to drill and die
Point for them the virtue of slaughter
Make plain to them the excellence of killing

And a field where a thousand corpses lie.
Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son
Do not weep
War is kind!

Stephen Crane

The Terrorist, He's Watching

The bomb in the bar will explode at thirteen twenty.
Now it's just thirteen sixteen.
There's still time for some to go in,
And some to come out.

The terrorist has already crossed the street.
That distance keeps him out of danger,
and what a view- just like the movies:

A woman in a yellow jacket, she's going in.
A man in dark glasses, he's coming out.
Teenagers in jeans, they're talking.
Thirteen seventeen and four seconds.
The short one, he's lucky, he's getting on a scooter,
but the tall one, he's going in.

Thirteen seventeen and forty seconds.
That girl, she's walking along with a green ribbon in her hair.
But then a bus suddenly pulls in front of her.
Thirteen eighteen.
The girl's gone.
Was she that dumb, did she go in or not,
We'll see when they carry them out.
Thirteen nineteen.
Somehow no one's going in.
Another guy, fat, bald, is leaving, though.
Wait a second, looks like he's looking for something in his
pockets and
at thirteen twenty minus ten seconds
he goes back in for his crummy gloves.

Thirteen twenty exactly.
This waiting, it's taking forever.
Any second now.
No, not yet.
Yes, now.
The bomb, it explodes.

Wisława Szymborska

Farewell to Barn and Stack and Tree

“Farewell to barn and stack and tree,
Farewell to Severn shore.
Terence, look your last at me,
For I come home no more.

“The sun burns on the half-mown hill, 5
By now the blood is dried;
And Maurice amongst the hay lies still
And my knife is in his side.

“My mother thinks us long away;
“Tis time the field were mown. 10
She had two sons at rising day,
To-night she’ll be alone.

“And here’s a bloody hand to shake,
And oh, man, here’s good-bye;
We’ll sweat no more on scythe and rake, 15
My bloody hands and I.

“I wish you strength to bring you pride,
And a love to keep you clean,
And I wish you luck, come Lammastide,
At racing on the green. 20

“Long for me the rick will wait,
And long will wait the fold,
And long will stand the empty plate,
And dinner will be cold.”

A. E. Housman

Breakfast

He poured coffee
into his cup
he put milk
in his cup of coffee
he put sugar
in his cup of coffee and milk
With his teaspoon
he stirred it
he drank the coffee and milk
and he put down the cup
without speaking to me

He lit
a cigarette
he made rings
with the smoke
he put the ashes
in the ash-tray
without speaking to me
without looking at me

He got up
he put
his hat on his head
he put on
his raincoat
because it was raining
and he went out

in the rain
without a word
without a look.
And I, I put
my head in my hands
and wept.

Jacques Prevert (Translated by Regi Siriwardene)

Society

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, son, 1
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 5
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 10
while their left hands search
my empty pockets.

'Feel at home!' 'Come again',
they say, and when I come
again and feel 15
at home, once, twice,
there will be no thrice-
for then I find doors shut on me.

So I have learned many things,
I have learned to wear many faces 20
like dresses – homeface,
officeface, streetface, host face,cock-
tailface, with all their conforming smiles
like a fixed portrait smile.

And I have learned too 25
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say 'Goodbye'
when I mean 'Goodriddance!'
to say 'Glad to see you,' 30

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 35
to unlearn all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to re-learn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!

So show me, son, 40
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
once upon a time when I was like you.

Gabriel Okara

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

The free bird leaps
on the back of the wind
and floats downstream
till the current ends
and dips his wings
in the orange sun rays
and dares to claim the sky.

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage
can seldom see through
his bars of rage
his wings are clipped and
his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with fearful trill
of the things unknown

but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill for the caged bird
sings of freedom

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn
and he names the sky his own.

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

Maya Angelou

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went downtown,
We people on the pavement looked at him;
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
'Good-morning,' and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich - yes, richer than a king ---
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Big Match, 1983

Glimpsing the headlines in the newspapers,
tourists scuttle for cover, cancel their options
on rooms with views of temple and holy mountain.
“Flash point in Paradise.” “Racial pot boils over.”
And even the gone away boy
who had hoped to find lost roots, lost lovers,
lost talent even, out among the palms,
makes timely return giving thanks
that Toronto is quite romantic enough
for his purposes.

Powerless this time to shelter or to share
we strive to be objective, try to trace
the match that lit this sacrificial fire.
the steps by which we reached this ravaged place.
We talk of “Forty Eight” and “Fifty Six”,
of freedom and the treacherous politics
of language; see the first sparks of this hate
fanned into flame in Nineteen Fifty Eight,
yet find no comfort in our neat solution,
no calm abstraction, and no absolution.

The game's in other hands in any case.
These fires ring factory, and hovel,
and Big Match fever, flaring high and fast,
has both sides in its grip and promises
dizzier scores than any at the oval.

In a tall house dim with old books and pictures
calm hands quit the clamouring telephone.
'It's a strange life we're leading here just now,
not a dull moment. No one can complain
of boredom, that's for sure. Up all night keeping watch,
and then as curfew ends and your brave lands
dash out at dawn to start another day
of fun, and games, and general jollity,
I send Padmini and the girls to a neighbor's house.

Who, me? - Oh I'm doing fine. I always was
a drinking man you know and nowadays
I'm stepping up my intake quite a bit,
the general idea being that when those torches
come within fifty feet of this house don't you see
it won't be my books that go up first, but me."

A pause. Then, steady and every bit as clear
as though we are neighbours still as we had been
In Fifty Eight. "Thanks, by the way for ringing.
There's nothing you can do to help us but
it's good to know some lines haven't yet been cut."

Out of the palmyrah fences of Jaffna
bristle a hundred guns.
Shopfronts in the Pettah, landmarks of our childhood
Curl like old photographs in the flames.
Blood on their khaki uniforms, three boys lie dying;
a crowd looks silently the other way.
Near the wheels of his smashed bicycle
at the corner of Duplication Road a child lies dead
and two policemen look the other way
as a stout man, sweating with fear, falls to his knees
beneath a bo-tree in a shower of sticks and stones

flung by his neighbour's hands.
The joys of childhood, friendships of our youth
ravaged by pieties and politics
screaming across our screens her agony
at last exposed, Sri Lanka burns alive.

Yasmine Gooneratne

Life

The Earthen Goblet

O silent goblet red from head to heel,
How did you feel
When you were being twirled
Upon the Potter's wheel
Before the Potter gave you to the world?

'I felt a conscious impulse in my clay
To break away
From the great Potter's hand that burned so warm.

I felt vast
Feeling of sorrow to be cast
Into my present form.

'Before that fatal hour
That saw me captive on the Potter's wheel
And cast into this crimson goblet-sleep,
I used to feel
The fragrant friendship of a little flower
Whose root was in my bosom buried deep.

'The Potter has drawn out the living breath of me
And given me a form which is the death of me.
My past unshapely natural state was best
With just one flower flaming through my breast.'

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya

Father and Son

Father

It's not time to make a change,
Just relax, take it easy.
You're still young, that's your fault,
There's so much you have to know.
Find a girl, settle down,
If you want you can marry.
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy.

I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy,
To be calm when you've found something going on.
But take your time, think a lot,
Why, think of everything you've got.
For you will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not.

Son

How can I try to explain, cause when I do he turns away again.
It's always been the same, same old story.
From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen.
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away.
I know I have to go.

Father

It's not time to make a change,
Just sit down, take it slowly.
You're still young, that's your fault,

There's so much you have to go through.
Find a girl, settle down,
If you want, you can marry.
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy.

Son

All the times that I've cried, keeping all the things I knew inside,
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it.
If they were right, I'd agree, but it's them they know, not me,
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away.
I know I have to go.

Cat Stevens

Fear

I don't want them to turn
my little girl into a swallow.
She would fly far away into the sky
and never fly again to my straw bed,
or she would nest in the eaves 5
where I could not comb her hair.
I don't want them to turn
my little girl into a swallow.

I don't want them to make
my little girl a princess. 10
In tiny golden slippers
how could she play on the meadow?
And when night came, no longer
would she sleep at my side.
I don't want them to make 15
my little girl a princess.

And even less do I want them
one day to make her queen.
They would put her on a throne
where I could not go to see her. 20
And when nighttime came
I could never rock her ...
I don't want them to make
my little girl a queen!

Gabriela Mistral (Translated by Doris Dana)

The Clown's Wife

About my husband, the clown,
what could I say?

On stage, he's a different person.
Up there he's a king on a throne,
but at home you should hear him moan.

The moment he walks through that door
without that red nose and them funny clothes,
he seems to have the world on his shoulder.

I do me best to cheer him up, poor soul.
I juggle with eggs, I turn cartwheels,
I tell jokes, I do me latest card trick,
I even have a borrow of his red nose.

But he doesn't say exactly how he feels,
doesn't say what's bothering him inside.
Just sits there saying almost to himself:

'O life, ah life,
what would I do without this clown of a wife?'

Johnson Agard

Humour

The Camel's Hump

The Camel's hump is an ugly lump
Which well you may see at the Zoo;
But uglier yet is the hump we get
From having too little to do.

Kiddies and grown-ups too-oo-oo,
If we haven't enough to do-oo-oo,
We get the hump-
Cameelious hump-
The hump that is black and blue!

We climb out of bed with a frouzly head,
And a snarly-yarly voice.
We shiver and scowl and we grunt and we
growl
At our bath and our boots and our toys;

And there ought to be a corner for me
(And I know there is one for you)
When we get the hump-
Cameelious hump-
The hump that is black and blue!

The cure for this ill is not to sit still,
Or frowst with a book by the fire;
But to take a large hoe and a shovel also,
And dig till you gently perspire;

And then you will find that the sun and the
wind,
And the Djinn of the Garden too,
Have lifted the hump-
The horrible hump-
The hump that is black and blue!

I get it as well as you-oo-oo-
If I haven't enough to do-oo-oo!
We all get the hump-
Cameelious hump-
Kiddies and grown-ups too!

Rudyard Kipling

Upside-Down

Once there lived an Upside-Down
Who was the talk of all the town.
If he was told to turn to right
He turned to left out of spite.
 If he went sailing in a boat
 No one could make him understand
 Why he seemed to be afloat
 And what had happened to the land.
He read his letters backside-fore,
And wrote his letters backside-fore.
So if a "ton" was to be read
He read it "not," the dunder-head!
 All his life he was afraid
 To cross a bridge. He'd always wade
 (Unless the water was too deep
 Or the embankment was too steep.)
He went into a restaurant;
The waiter said, "What do you want?"
He said, "I'd like a pair of socks
With clocks on them, and in a box."
 The circus came to town one day;
 Of course he went without delay.
 And everyone said Upside-Down
 Was funnier than the circus clown.
Just yesterday the postman brought
A letter to him from his aunt:
"Shall I read it? P'raps I ought,
P'raps I will, p'raps I can't."

He eyed it this way, eyed it that,
Then he stuck it in his hat.
His auntie wrote, "Dearest boy,
All you do is to annoy:
Wearing flannels when it's hot,
Going naked when it's not!
You must behave as others do
If they're to have respect for you!"

Alexander Kushner (translated by Margaret Wettin)

The Huntsman

Kagwa hunted the lion,
Through bush and forest went his spear.
One day he found the skull of a man
And said to it, "How did you come here?"
The skull opened its mouth and said,
'Talking brought me here.'

Kagwa hurried home;
Went to the king's chair and spoke:
'In the forest I found a talking skull.'
The king was silent. Then he said slowly,
'Never since I was born of my mother
Have I seen or heard of a skull which spoke.'

The king called out his guards:
'Two of you now go with him
And find this talking skull;
But if his tale is a lie
And the skull speaks no word,
This Kagwa himself must die'

They rode into the forest;
For days and nights they found nothing.
At last they saw the skull; Kagwa
Said to it, "How did you come here?"
The skull said nothing. Kagwa implored,
But the skull said nothing.

The guards said, 'Kneel down.'
They killed him with sword and spear.
Then the skull opened its mouth;
 'Huntsman, how did you come here?'
And the dead man answered,
 'Talking brought me here.'

Edward Lowbury

Two's Company

The sad story of a man who didn't believe in ghosts

They said the house was haunted, but
He laughed at them and said, 'Tut, tut!
I've never heard such tittle-tattle
As ghosts that groan and chains that rattle;
And just to prove I'm in the right,
Please leave me here to spend the night.'

They left him just as dusk was falling
With a hunchback moon and screech-owls calling.

But what is that? Outside it seemed
As if chains rattled, someone screamed!

Come, come, it's merely nerves, he's certain
(But just the same, he draws the curtain).
The stroke of twelve - but there's no clock!
He shuts the door and turns the lock
(Of course, he knows that no one's there,
But no harm's done by taking care!);
Someone's outside - the silly joker,
(He may as well pick up the poker!)
That noise again! He checks the doors,
Shutters the windows, makes a pause
To seek the safest place to hide -
(The cupboard's strong - he creeps inside).
'Not that there's anything to fear!'
He tells himself, when at his ear
A voice breathes softly, 'How do you do!
I am a ghost. Pray who are you?'

Raymond Wilson