

Poems on the Underground

Black History Month



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POEMS ON THE UNDERGROUND

Black History Month

We are delighted to mark BHM with a selection of poems by Black poets with close links to England, Scotland, the United States, the Caribbean and Africa. The poets include Nobel Prizewinners, poet laureates and performance artists, all reflecting in different ways on their individual experience.

We hope readers will gain new insight into the complexities of Black history from the poems reprinted here.

All the poems in this collection have been featured on London tube trains, reaching an estimated three million daily travellers in this most international of cities.

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FOREWORD



A PORTABLE PARADISE

And if I speak of Paradise,
then I'm speaking of my grandmother
who told me to carry it always
on my person, concealed, so
no one else would know but me.
That way they can't steal it, she'd say.
And if life puts you under pressure,
trace its ridges in your pocket,
smell its piney scent on your handkerchief,
hum its anthem under your breath.
And if your stresses are sustained and daily,
get yourself to an empty room – be it hotel,
hostel or hovel – find a lamp
and empty your paradise onto a desk:
your white sands, green hills and fresh fish.
Shine the lamp on it like the fresh hope
of morning, and keep staring at it till you sleep.

Roger Robinson

MOMENT IN A PEACE MARCH

A holy multitude pouring
through the gates of Hyde Park –
A great hunger repeated
in cities all over the world

And when one hejab-ed woman
stumbled in the midst
how quickly she was uplifted –
With no loaves and no fish

Only the steadying doves of our arms
against the spectre of another war.

Grace Nichols

BENEDICTION

Thanks to the ear
that someone may hear

Thanks to seeing
that someone may see

Thanks to feeling
that someone may feel

Thanks to touch
that one may be touched

Thanks to flowering of white moon
and spreading shawl of black night
holding villages and cities together

James Berry

I SING OF CHANGE

I sing
of the beauty of Athens
without its slaves

Of a world free
of kings and queens
and other remnants
of an arbitrary past

Of earth
with no sharp north
or deep south
without blind curtains
or iron walls

Of the end
of warlords and armouries
and prisons of hate and fear

Of deserts treeing
and fruiting
after the quickening rains

Of the sun radiating ignorance
and stars informing
nights of unknowing

I sing of a world reshaped

Niyi Osundare

TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE
ACKNOWLEDGES WORDSWORTH'S
SONNET 'TO TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE'

I have never walked on Westminster Bridge
or had a close-up view of daffodils.
My childhood's roots are the Haitian hills
where runaway slaves made a freedom pledge
and scarlet poincianas flaunt their scent.
I have never walked on Westminster Bridge
or speak, like you, with Cumbrian accent.
My tongue bridges Europe to Dahomey.
Yet how sweet is the smell of liberty
when human beings share a common garment.
So, thanks brother, for your sonnet's tribute.
May it resound when the Thames' text stays
muted.
And what better ground than a city's bridge
for my unchained ghost to trumpet love's
decree.

John Agard

BARTER

That first winter alone, the true meaning
of all the classroom rhymes that juggled *snow*
and *go, old* and *cold*, acquired new leanings.
With reluctance I accepted the *faux*
deafness and odd looks my Accra greetings
attracted, but I couldn't quell my deep
yearning for contact, warmth, recognition,
the shape of my renown on someone's lips.

Always the canny youth whose history
entailed life on skeletal meal rations
during the Sahel drought of eighty-three,
I lingered in London *gares* to carry
cases for crooked and senior citizens;
barter for a smile's costless revelry.

Nii Ayikwei Parkes

HISTORY AND AWAY

What we do with time
and what time does with us
is the way of history,
spun down around our feet.

So we say, today,
that we meet our Caribbean shadow
just as it follows the sun,
away into the curve of tomorrow.

In fact, our sickle of islands
and continental strips are mainlands
of time with our own marks on them,
yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Andrew Salkey

SEASON

Rust is ripeness, rust,
And the wilted corn-plume;
Pollen is mating-time when swallows
Weave a dance
Of feathered arrows
Thread corn-stalks in winged
Streaks of light. And, we loved to hear
Spliced phrases of the wind, to hear
Rasps in the field, where corn-leaves
Pierce like bamboo slivers.

Now, garnerers we
Awaiting rust on tassels, draw
Long shadows from the dusk, wreath
Dry thatch in wood-smoke. Laden stalks
Ride the germ's decay - we await
The promise of the rust.

Wole Soyinka

I AM BECOMING MY MOTHER

Yellow/brown woman
fingers smelling always of onions

My mother raises rare blooms
and waters them with tea
her birth waters sang like rivers
my mother is now me

My mother had a linen dress
the colour of the sky
and stored lace and damask
tablecloths
to pull shame out of her eye.

I am becoming my mother
brown/yellow woman
fingers smelling always of onions.

Lorna Goodison

DREAMER

roun a rocky corner
by de sea
seat up
pon a drif wood
yuh can fine she
gazin cross de water
a stick
eena her han
tryin to trace
a future
in de san

Jean Binta Breeze

DREAM BOOGIE

Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a —

*You think
It's a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a —

What did I say?

Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!

*Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!
Y-e-a-h!*

Langston Hughes

NAIMA

for John Coltrane

Propped against the crowded bar
he pours into the curved and silver horn
his old unhappy longing for a home
the dancers twist and turn
he leans and wishes he could burn
his memories to ashes like some old notorious
emperor
of rome. but no stars blazed across the sky
when he was born
no wise men found his hovel. this crowded bar
where dancers twist and turn
holds all the fame and recognition he will ever
earn
on earth or heaven. he leans against the bar
and pours his old unhappy longing in the
saxophone

Kamau Brathwaite

MAMA DOT

Born on a sunday
in the kingdom of Ashante

Sold on monday
into slavery

Ran away on tuesday
cause she born free

Lost a foot on wednesday
when they catch she

Worked all thursday
till her head grey

Dropped on friday
where they burned she

Freed on saturday
In a new century

Fred D'Aguiar

FREE

Born free
to be caught
and fashioned
and shaped
and freed to wander
within
a caged dream
of tears

Merle Collins

MAP OF THE NEW WORLD: ARCHIPELAGOES

At the end of this sentence, rain will begin.
At the rain's edge, a sail.

Slowly the sail will lose sight of islands;
into a mist will go the belief in harbours
of an entire race.

The ten-years war is finished.
Helen's hair, a grey cloud.
Troy, a white ashpit
by the drizzling sea.

The drizzle tightens like the strings of a harp.
A man with clouded eyes picks up the rain
and plucks the first line of the *Odyssey*.

Derek Walcott

BOM MUMBAI AIRPORT

This far East your thoughts are the edge
of the world. It will not be the last time
that you walk through a door hoping
to return. From your cabin window heat
sweats off the tarmac. Think of this space
like a tree without branches or a wind
that hides itself till you show your face.
You are not alone you have my voice.
There is the wind and there is my face.
The man next to you will wake from
his dream with the sound turned low.

Nick Makoha

IBADAN

Ibadan,
 running splash of rust
and gold – flung and scattered
among seven hills like broken
china in the sun.

J.P. Clark-Bekederemo

THE PALM TREES AT CHIGAWE

You stood like women in green
Proud travellers in panama hats and java print
Your fruit-milk caused monkeys and shepherds
to scramble
Your dry leaves were banners for night
fishermen
But now stunted trees stand still beheaded –
A curious sight for the tourists

Jack Mapanje

SUN A-SHINE, RAIN A-FALL

Sun a-shine an' rain a-fall,
The Devil an' him wife cyan 'gree at all,
The two o' them want one fish-head,
The Devil call him wife bone-head,
She hiss her teeth, call him cock-eye,
Greedy, worthless an' workshy,
While them busy callin' name,
The puss walk in, sey is a shame
To see a nice fish go' to was'e,
Lef' with a big grin pon him face.

Valerie Bloom

for cricketer, Vivian Richards

Like the sun rising and setting
Like the thunderous roar of a bull rhino
Like the sleek, quick grace of a gazelle,
The player springs into the eye
And lights the world with fires
Of a million dreams, a million aspirations.
The batsman-hero climbs the skies,
Strikes the earth-ball for six
And the landscape rolls with the ecstasy of the
magic play.

Through the covers, the warrior thrusts a
majestic cut
Lighting the day with runs
As bodies reel and tumble,
Hands clap, eyes water
And hearts move inside out.

The volcano erupts!
Blows the game apart.

Faustin Charles

ON THE THAMES

The houseboat tilts into the water at low tide, ducklings slip in mud. Nothing is stable in this limbo summer, where he leaves his shoes in the flat. She decides to let a room., the ad says *only ten minutes to the tube, I have a washing machine and a cat.* The truth more of a struggle than anyone cares to admit. And everywhere progress: an imprint of cranes on the skyline, white vans on bridges, the Shard shooting up to the light like a foxglove.

Karen McCarthy Woolf

THE LONDON EYE

Through my gold-tinted Gucci sunglasses,
the sightseers. Big Ben's quarter chime
strikes the convoy of number 12 buses
that bleeds into the city's monochrome.

Through somebody's zoom lens, me shouting
to you, 'Hello . . . on . . . bridge . . . 'minster!'
The aerial view postcard, the man writing
sqat words like black cabs in rush hour.

The South Bank buzzes with a rising treble.
You kiss my cheek, formal as a blind date.
We enter Cupid's Capsule, a thought bubble
where I think, 'Space age!', you think, 'She was
late.'

Big Ben strikes six, my SKIN.Beat blinks, replies
18.02. We're moving anti-clockwise.

Patience Agbabi

PROMISE

Remember, the time of year
when the future appears
like a blank sheet of paper
a clean calendar, a new chance.
On thick white snow
you vow fresh footprints
then watch them go
with the wind's hearty gust.
Fill your glass. Here's tae us. Promises
made to be broken, made to last.

Jackie Kay

DEW

This morning I took the dew from the broad
leaf of the breadfruit tree, and washed
the sleep from my eyes. I saw a blue
sky. The cock crowed again and again.
On such mornings, each deep breath,
clean as new light, is a blessed gift.

Kwame Dawes

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