

World

Poems on the Underground



**MAYOR
OF LONDON**

Transport for London



World
Poems on the Underground

edited by
Gerard Benson
Judith Chernaik
Cicely Herbert

POEMS ON THE UNDERGROUND

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FOREWORD

The poets in our collection of World Poems
were born in forty-four different countries,
spanning the continents. Some poets remained
in their country of birth, identifying
passionately with its language and culture;
others roamed the world as students, travellers
or exiles. Many settled in London, drawn by its
long tradition of welcoming the wider diasporas
from every corner of the world.

Common themes recur in these poems: the
triumphs and tragedies of history, the sorrows
of exile, the joys of return, the enduring
consolations of art and poetry. The poets range
from writers just making a name for themselves
to Nobel laureates. Several write in English,
others in over twenty different languages; their
poems are translated here by distinguished
British, Irish and American poets. Each poet
contributes something unique and personal to
the story of their lives and also of ours.

We hope the poems will introduce a new
audience to a broad range of world poetry:
a celebration in many eloquent voices of
our common humanity.

The Editors
London 2012

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A F G H A N I S T A N

My Voice

I come from a distant land
with a foreign knapsack on my back
with a silenced song on my lips

As I travelled down the river of my life
I saw my voice
(like Jonah)
swallowed by a whale

And my very life lived in my voice
Kabul, December 1989

Partaw Naderi
translated by Sarah Maguire
and Yama Yari

A R U B A

Free

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

Merle Collins

Late Summer Fires

The paddocks shave black
with a foam of smoke that stays,
welling out of red-black wounds.

In the white of a drought
this happens. The hardcourt game.
Logs that fume are mostly cattle,

inverted, stubby. Tree stumps are kilns.
Walloped, wiped, hand-pumped,
even this day rolls over, slowly.

At dusk, a family drives sheep
out through the yellow
of the Aboriginal flag.

Les Murray

A Collector

The things I found
But they'll scatter them again
to the four winds
as soon as I am dead

Old gadgets
fossilised plants and shells
books broken dolls
coloured postcards

And all the words
I have found
my incomplete
my unsatisfied words

Erich Fried
translated by Stuart Hood

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***giovanni caboto/john cabot**

fourteen hundred and ninety seven
giovanni sailed from the coast of devon

52 days discovered cape breton n.s.
caught some cod went home
with 10 bear hides
(none prime)

told henry 7
his majesty now owned
cipango land of jewels
abounding moreover in silks
& brasilwode
also the spice islands of asia
& the country of the grand khan

henry gave giovanni 30 quid
to go back to nova scotia

who was kidding who?

Earle Birney

from Poetry

And it was at that age . . . Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't
know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night,
abruptly from the others,
among violent fires
or returning alone,
there I was without a face
and it touched me.

Pablo Neruda
translated by Alastair Reid

Vase

a word eradicates the world
a feather
drifts down

and yet, a bird's nest
in each of its fragments
preserves the whole

Yang Lian
translated by John Cayley

In the microscope

Here too are dreaming landscapes,
lunar, derelict.
Here too are the masses,
tillers of the soil.
And cells, fighters
who lay down their lives
for a song.

Here too are cemeteries,
fame and snow.
And I hear murmuring,
the revolt of immense estates.

Miroslav Holub
translated by Ian Milner

Almost without Noticing

Almost without noticing,
without thinking, it seems,
you've arrived where you see far.
Thirty years back, more, the path vanishes,
thirty years ahead, more, the path vanishes:
you're forced to sit down in the shade
and think.
Memory,
mother of truth and myth,
tell how the terrain divided the stream.

Eira Stenberg
translated by Herbert Lomas

Distances

Swifts turn in the heights of the air;
higher still turn the invisible stars.
When day withdraws to the ends of the
earth
their fires shine on a dark expanse of sand.

We live in a world of motion and distance.
The heart flies from tree to bird,
from bird to distant star,
from star to love; and love grows
in the quiet house, turning and working,
servant of thought, a lamp held in one
hand.

Philippe Jaccottet
translated by Derek Mahon

Boy with Orange
(out of Kosovo)

A boy holding an orange in his hands
Has crossed the border in uncertainty.

He stands there, stares with marble eyes at
scenes
Too desolate for him to comprehend.

Now, in this globe he's clutching something
safe,
A round assurance and a promised joy

No one shall take away. He cannot smile.
Behind him are the stones of babyhood.

Soon he will find a hand, perhaps, to hold,
Or a kind face, some comfort for a while.

Lotte Kramer

Tin Roof

Wild harmattan winds whip you
 but still you stay;
 they spit dust all over your gleam
 and twist your sharp cutting edges.
 The rains come zinging mud
 with their own tapping music
 yet you remain
 – my pride –
 my very own tin roof.

Nii Ayikwei Parkes

‘Loving the rituals’

Loving the rituals that keep men close,
 Nature created means for friends apart:

pen, paper, ink, the alphabet,
 signs for the distant and disconsolate heart.

Palladas
translated by Tony Harrison

**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 mute.
 And what better ground than a city’s bridge
 for my unchained ghost to trumpet love’s
 decree.

John Agard

Accordionist

for André Kertesz

The accordionist is a blind intellectual
carrying an enormous typewriter whose
keys
grow wings as the instrument expands into
a tall
horizontal hat that collapses with a
tubercular wheeze.

My century is a sad one of collapses.
The concertina of the chest; the tubular
bells
of the high houses; the flattened ellipses
of our skulls that open like petals.

We are the poppies sprinkled along the
field.
We are simple crosses dotted with blood.
Beware the sentiments concealed
in this short rhyme. Be wise. Be good.

George Szirtes

**Finding India in
Unexpected Places**

A street in Bath,
a bus in Medellín,
a gesture in Gyeongju –

A yellow fragrance in Oaxaca,
Oleanders
on the isle of Skopelos –

Memories distort geography.

But how did the Mayas
learn about elephants,
about Ganesh, and the precise shape
of his ears?

Sujata Bhatt

Poetry

Who broke these mirrors
 and tossed them
 shard
 by shard
 among the branches?
 And now . . .
 shall we ask L'Akhdar to come and see?
 Colours are all muddled up
 and the image is entangled
 with the thing
 and the eyes burn.
 L'Akhdar must gather these mirrors
 on his palm
 and match the pieces together
 any way he likes
 and preserve
 the memory of the branch.

Saadi Youssef
translated from the Arabic
by Khaled Mattawa

The Emigrant Irish

Like oil lamps we put them out the back,
 of our houses, of our minds. We had lights
 better than, newer than and then

a time came, this time and now
 we need them. Their dread, makeshift
 example.

They would have thrived on our necessities.
 What they survived we could not even live.
 By their lights now it is time to
 imagine how they stood there, what they
 stood with,
 that their possessions may become our
 power.

Cardboard. Iron. Their hardships parcelled
 in them.
 Patience. Fortitude. Long-suffering
 in the bruise-coloured dusk of the New
 World.

And all the old songs. And nothing to lose.

Eavan Boland

The Aegean

This music has lasted since the world began.
A rock was born among the waters
while tiny waves chatted in a soft universal
tongue.

The shell of a sea-turtle
would not have foretold the guitar.
Your music has always risen to the sky,
green tap-root, Mother Sea,
first of all firsts. You enfold us,
nurturing us with music – threat,
fable, hypnosis, lullaby, roar,
omen, myth,

little agonies
of grit, of wreckages, of joys –

Maria Luisa Spaziani
translated by Beverly Allen

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 bonehead,
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

JAPAN

'Autumn evening'

Autumn evening –
A crow on a bare branch.

Matsuo Bashō
translated by Kenneth Rexroth

LUXEMBOURG

The birds will still sing

Break my branches
saw me into bits
the birds will still sing
in my roots

Anise Koltz
translated by John Montague

KURDISTAN

My children

I can hear them talking, my children
fluent English and broken Kurdish.

And whenever I disagree with them
they will comfort each other by saying:
Don't worry about mum, she's Kurdish.

Will I be the foreigner in my own
home?

Choman Hardi

MALAWI

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

Modern Secrets

Last night I dreamt in Chinese.
Eating Yankee shredded wheat
I said it in English
To a friend who answered
In monosyllables:
All of which I understood.

The dream shrank to its fiction.
I had understood its end
Many years ago. The sallow child
Ate rice from its ricebowl
And hides still in the cupboard
With the china and tea-leaves.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Immigrant

November '63: eight months in London.
I pause on the low bridge to watch the
pelicans:
they float swanlike, arching their white
necks
over only slightly ruffled bundles of wings,
burying awkward beaks in the lake's water.

I clench cold fists in my Marks and
Spencer's jacket
and secretly test my accent once again:
St James's Park; St James's Park; St James's
Park.

Fleur Adcock

On Lake Nicaragua

Slow cargo-launch, midnight, mid-lake,
bound from San Miguelito to Granada.
The lights ahead not yet in sight,
the dwindling ones behind completely
gone.

Only the stars
(the mast a finger pointing to the Seven
Sisters)
and the moon, rising above Chontales.

Another launch (just one red light) goes by
and sinks into the night.

We, for them:

another red light sinking in the night...
And I, watching the stars, lying on the deck
between bunches of bananas and Chontales
cheeses,
wonder: perhaps there's one that is an earth
like ours
and someone's watching me (watching the
stars)
from another launch, on another night, on
another lake.

Ernesto Cardenal
translated by Ernesto Cardenal
and Robert Pring-Mill

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

Should You Die First

Let me at least collect your smells
as specimens: your armpits, woollen
sweater,
fingers yellow from smoke. I'd need
to take an imprint of your foot
and make recordings of your laugh.

These archives I shall carry into exile;
my body a St Helena where ships no
longer dock,
a rock in the ocean, an outpost where the
wind howls
and polar bears beat down the door.

Annabelle Despard

Carving

Others can carve out
their space
in tombs and pyramids.
Our time cannot be trapped
in cages.
Nor hope, nor laughter.
We let the moment rise
like birds and planes and angels
to the sky.

Eternity is this.
Your breath on the window-pane,
living walls with shining eyes.
The surprise of spires,
uncompromising verticals. Knowing
we have been spared
to lift our faces up
for one more day,
into one more sunrise.

Imtiaz Dharker

Star

I returned to you years later,
gray and lovely city,
unchanging city
buried in the waters of the past.

I'm no longer the student
of philosophy, poetry, and curiosity,
I'm not the young poet who wrote
too many lines

and wandered in the maze
of narrow streets and illusions.
The sovereign of clocks and shadows
has touched my brow with his hand,

but still I'm guided by
a star by brightness
and only brightness
can undo or save me.

Adam Zagajewski
translated by Clare Cavanagh

25th April 1974

This is the dawn I was waiting for
The first day whole and pure
When we emerged from night and
silence
Alive into the substance of time

Sophia de Mello Breyner
translated by Ruth Fainlight

'Thread suns'

Thread suns
above the grey-black
wilderness.
A tree-
high thought
tunes in to light's pitch: there
are
still songs to be sung on the
other side
of mankind.

Paul Celan
translated by Michael Hamburger

from **Requiem**

The hour of remembrance has drawn close
again.

I see you, hear you, feel you:

the one they could hardly get to the
window,
the one who no longer walks on this earth,

the one who shook her beautiful head,
and said: 'Coming here is like coming
home.'

I would like to name them all but they took
away
the list and there's no way of finding them.

For them I have woven a wide shroud
from the humble words I heard among
them.

I remember them always, everywhere,
I will never forget them, whatever comes.

Anna Akhmatova
translated by Richard McKane

Midsummer, Tobago

Broad sun-stoned beaches.

White heat.
A green river.

A bridge,
scorched yellow palms

from the summer-sleeping house
drowsing through August.

Days I have held,
days I have lost,

days that outgrow, like daughters,
my harbouring arms.

Derek Walcott

Nocturne

And we shall bathe, my love,
 in the presence of Africa.
 Furnishings from Guinea and the Congo,
 heavy and burnished, calm and dark.
 Masks, pure and primeval, on the walls,
 distant but so present!
 Ebony thrones for ancestral guests,
 the Princes of the hill country.
 Musky perfumes, thick grass-mats of
 silence,
 Shadowed cushions for leisure,
 the sound of a spring – of peace.
 Mythic language; and far-off songs,
 voices woven like the strip-cloths of the
 Sudan.
 And then, dear lamp, your kindness
 in cradling the obsession with this
 presence,
 Black, white, and red:
 oh! red like the earth of Africa.

Léopold Sédar Senghor
translated by Gerard Benson

Belgrade

White bone among the clouds

 You arise out of your pyre
 Out of your ploughed-up barrows
 Out of your scattered ashes

 You arise out of your disappearance

 The sun keeps you
 In its golden reliquary
 High above the yapping of centuries

 And bears you to the marriage
 Of the fourth river of Paradise
 With the thirty-sixth river of Earth

 White bone among the clouds
 Bone of our bones

Vasko Popa
translated from the Serbo-Croat
by Anne Pennington

Inside My Zulu Hut

It is a hive
without any bees
to build the walls
with golden bricks of honey.
A cave cluttered
with a millstone,
calabashes of sour milk
claypots of foaming beer
sleeping grass mats
wooden head rests
tanned goat skins
tied with *riempies*
to wattle rafters
blackened by the smoke
of kneaded cow dung
burning under
the three-legged pot
on the earthen floor
to cook my porridge.

Mbuyiseni Mtshali

'The waves, blue walls/of Africa'

The waves, blue walls
of Africa, go and come back.

When they go . . .
Ah, to go with them!

Ah, to come back with them!
When they come back . . .

Rafael Alberti
translated by Mark Strand

From March '79

Tired of all who come with words, words
but no language
I went to the snow-covered island.
The wild does not have words.
The unwritten pages spread themselves out
in all directions!
I come across the marks of roe-deer's
hooves in the snow.
Language but no words.

Tomas Tranströmer
translated by John F. Deane

Viv

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

Baku at Night

Reaching down to the starless heavy sea
in the pitch-black night,
Baku is a sunny wheatfield.
High above on a hill,
grains of light hit my face by the handfuls,
and the music in the air flows like the
Bosporus.
High above on a hill,
my heart goes out like a raft
into the endless absence,
beyond memory
down to the starless heavy sea
in the pitch dark.

Nazim Hikmet

translated by Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk

The Undertaking

The darkness lifts, imagine, in your lifetime.
 There you are – cased in clean bark you
 drift
 through weaving rushes, fields flooded with
 cotton.
 You are free. The river films with lilies,
 shrubs appear, shoots thicken into palm.
 And now
 all fear gives way: the light
 looks after you, you feel the waves’
 goodwill
 as arms widen over the water; Love,

 the key is turned. Extend yourself –
 it is the Nile, the sun is shining,
 everywhere you turn is luck.

Louise Glück

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Les Murray: 'Late Summer Fires' from *New Collected Poems* (Carcanet 2003)

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Nii Ayikwei Parkes: 'Tin Roof' from *eyes of a boy, lips of a man* (Flipped Eye 1999)

Vasko Popa: 'Belgrade' from *Vasko Popa: Complete Poems* translated by Anne Pennington (Anvil Press 2011)

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Léopold Sédar Senghor: 'Nocturne' translated by Gerard Benson from *OEuvre poétique* (Seuil, Paris 1974)

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Adam Zagajewski: 'Star' translated by Clare Cavanagh from *Eternal Enemies* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2008)

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Our part in this activity has included 'exchanges' of poems with transport systems in Warsaw, Shanghai, Helsinki, Vienna, Paris and New York.

Finally, we are delighted to be included in the London 2012 Festival.

World

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