

Poems on the Underground

Black History Month

New Expanded Edition



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Black History Month

We are delighted to mark Black History Month with an expanded selection of poems by Black poets with close links to the UK, Europe, the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and Africa. The poets include Nobel Prize-winners, 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 Underground cars, reaching an estimated three million daily travellers in this most international of cities. The original posters are all accessible on our website: www.poemsontheunderground.org

We are grateful to Transport for London, Arts Council England and The British Council for enabling us to produce free copies of this leaflet. Copies can be obtained at many London Underground stations.

The Editors London 2023

Design by The Creative Practice

Published by Poems on the Underground
Registered at Companies House in England
and Wales No. 06844606 as
Underground Poems
Community Interest Company

Poems on the Underground isn't just a programme that brings moments of reflection to millions of Londoners annually – it's also experienced and enjoyed by those who work for Transport for London (TfL).

I love celebrations such as Black History Month as they are a great way to raise awareness of, and continue your education in, all aspects of culture, arts and history. Black History Month is an invaluable way to bring all of London's diverse communities together.

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush generation from the Caribbean to help rebuild Britain after World War II. TfL, like so many other organisations in London, has been shaped and transformed by their fantastic contribution and achievements.

It is therefore a wonderful tribute that, during Black History Month, this contribution is celebrated in this Poems on the Underground leaflet. Featured are the voices of Black poets from around the world, with several additions focusing specifically on the Windrush experience.

While these poets write of their own experiences, the feelings they evoke – of family, of hope, of London – are ones with which many of us, including myself, are familiar. I hope that these poems help you think about your own history and place within this bustling, teeming city.

Winsome Hull, BEM
Senior Business Strategy Manager,
Transport for London

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
 mute.
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 crocked 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 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
squat 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 to 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

BEACON OF HOPE

(for John La Rose)

welcome nocturnal friend
I name you beacon of hope
tonight fear fades to oblivion
as you guide us beyond the stars
to a new horizon

tomorrow a stranger will enter
my hut my cave my cool cavern of gloom
I will give him bread
he will bring good news from afar
I will give him water
he will bring a gift of light

Linton Kwesi Johnson

UPWARDS, FOR TY CHIJOKE

The last place the sun reaches in my garden
is the back wall where the ivy
grows above the stinging nettles.

What are they singing to us?
Is it painless to listen?
Will music soothe our anxious house?

Speech falls on things like rain
sun shades all the feelings of having a heart.
Here, take my pulse, take my breath,

take my arms as I drift off

Raymond Antrobus

COLONIZATION IN REVERSE

Wat a joyful news, Miss Mattie,
I feel like me heart gwine burs'
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by de t'ousan
From country and from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load
Jamaica is Englan boun.

Dem a-pour out o' Jamaica,
Everybody future plan
Is fe get a big-time job
An settle in de mother lan.

What a islan! What a people!
Man an woman, old an young
Jusa pack dem bag an baggage
An tun history upside dung!

Louise Bennett

AXE

My father, God bless his axe.
He grooved deep in pitch pine.
He spun his charm like bachelor galvanise
in hurricane. Once I saw him peep through
torrential rain like a saint at a killing.
And when the wind broke his cassava trees,
and the water overcame his eight-track
machine,
and his clothes were swept away in the
flood,
his Hail Mary fell upon a fortress of bone.
So he crossed his chest with appointed
finger
and hissed a prayer in glossolalic verse.
He may grand-charge and growl but he
woundeth not,
nor cursed the storm that Papa God send
to wash away the wish of him and every
dream he built.

Anthony Joseph

THE LONDON BREED

I love dis great polluted place
Where pop stars come to live their dreams
Here ravers come for drum and bass
And politicians plan their schemes,
The music of the world is here
Dis city can play any song
They came to here from everywhere
Tis they that made dis city strong.

A world of food displayed on streets
Where all the world can come and dine
On meals that end with bitter sweets
And cultures melt and intertwine,
Two hundred languages give voice
To fifteen thousand changing years
And all religions can rejoice
With exiled souls and pioneers.

Benjamin Zephaniah

THE ONLY THING FAR AWAY

In this country, Jamaica is not quite as far
as you might think. Walking through
Peckham
in London, West Moss Road in Manchester,
you pass green and yellow shops
where tie-headwomen bargain over the
price
of dasheen. And beside Jamaica is Spain
selling large yellow peppers, lemon to
squeeze
onto chicken. Beside Spain is Pakistan, then
Egypt,
Singapore, the world. . . here, strangers
build home
together, flood the ports with curry and
papayas;
in Peckham and on Moss Road, the place
smells
of more than just patty or tandoori. It smells
like
Mumbai, like Castries, like Princess Street,
Jamaica.
Sometimes in this country, the only thing
far away
is this country.

Kei Miller

DEI MIRACOLE

The spirit of structure can't be foreseen,
For somewhere between
The architecture and the dream
More than the sum of its parts
Somehow, somewhere, the heart.

Lemn Sissay

THE THING NOT SAID

We need life-jackets now to float
On words which leave so much unsaid.

How can this not sound like sophistry
To justify absence from your thoughts,
your bed?

But this haemorrhaging of language
Still keeps the best phrase locked in my
head.

Easy to talk of loneliness, of ageing,
damning
Those who would be Presidents and
Generals of the dead;

Forgetting the detail, the particular hunger
Of someone you know waiting to be fed.

And now I'm doing it again, drifting on
words,
More lines for the simple thing not said.

E.A. Markham

GUINEP

Our mothers have a thing
about guinep:

Mind you don't eat guinep in your good
clothes.

It will stain them.

Mind you don't climb guinep tree.
You will fall.

Mind you don't swallow guinep seed.
It will grow inside you.

Our mothers have a thing
about guinep: they're
secretly consuming it.

Olive Senior

PRAISE SONG FOR MY MOTHER

You were
water to me
deep and bold and fathoming

You were
moon's eye to me
pull and grained and mantling

You were
sunrise to me
rise and warm and streaming

You were
the fish's red gill to me
the flame tree's spread to me
the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell
replenishing replenishing

Go to your wide futures, you said

Grace Nichols

A DREAM OF LEAVIN

Man, so used to notn, this is
a dream I couldn't dream of dreamin,
so — I scare I might wake up.

One day I would be Englan bound!
A travel would have me on sea
not chained down below, every tick of
clock,
but free, man! Free like tourist!

Never see *me* coulda touch world of
Englan –
when from all accounts I hear
that is where all we prosperity end up.

I was always in a dream of leavin.
My half-finished house was on land
where work-laden ancestors' bones lay.

The old plantation land still stretch-out
down to the sea,
giving grazing to cattle.

James Berry

WINDRUSH CHILD

*(for Vince Reid, the youngest passenger
on the Empire Windrush, then aged 13)*

Behind you
Windrush child
palm trees wave goodbye

above you
Windrush child
seabirds asking why

around you
Windrush child
blue water rolling by

beside you
Windrush child
your Windrush mum and dad

think of storytime yard
and mango mornings

and new beginnings
doors closing and opening

John Agard

In Jamaica she was a teacher. Here, she is
charwoman
at night in the West End. She eats a cold
midnight meal
carried from home and is careful to expunge
her spice
trail with Dettol. She sings 'Jerusalem' to
herself and
recites the Romantic poets as she mops
hallways and
scours toilets, dreaming the while of her
retirement
mansion in Mandeville she is building brick by
brick.

Lorna Goodison

having
some summers gone
dug out
that old tree stump
that darkened my garden
having waited
without planting
(for it was impossible then
to choose the growth)

having lost the dream
but not the art of healing

having released the roots of pain
into content

I now
stir the skies

Jean Binta Breeze

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank poets and publishers for permission to reprint the following poems in copyright:

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Anthony Joseph: 'Axe' from *Sonnets for Albert* (Bloomsbury 2022) **Jackie Kay:** 'Promise' from *Darling: New and Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books 2007) **Nick Makoha:** 'BOM Mumbai Airport' by permission of the author **Jack Mapanje:** 'The Palm Trees at Chigawe' from *Of Chameleons and Gods* (Heinemann 1981) **E.A. Markham:** 'The Thing Not Said' from *Towards the End of a Century* (Anvil 1989) **Kei Miller:** 'The only thing far away' from *There is an Anger that Moves* (Carcanet 2007) **Grace Nichols:** 'Praise Song for my Mother' from *I have Crossed an Ocean: Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books 2010) and 'Moment in a Peace March' from *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (Bloodaxe Books 2009) **Niyi Osundare:** 'I Sing of Change' from *The Bees* (Picador 2011) **Nii Ayikwei Parkes:** 'Barter' from *The Making of You* (Peepal Tree 2010) **Roger Robinson:** 'A Portable Paradise' from *A Portable Paradise* (Peepal Tree 2019) **Andrew Salkey:** 'History and Away' by permission of the Estate of Andrew Salkey from *Away* (1980) **Olive Senior:** 'Guinep' from *Gardening in the Tropics* (McClelland & Stewart 1994) **Lemn Sissay:** 'Dei Miracole' from *Listener* (Canongate 2008) **Wole Soyinka:** 'Season' from *Idanre and Other Poems* (Methuen 1967) **Derek Walcott:** 'Map of the New World: Archipelagoes' from *Collected Poems 1948-1984* (Faber 1992) **Karen McCarthy Woolf:** 'On The Thames' from *On the River* (2013) by permission of the Author **Benjamin Zephaniah:** 'The London Breed' from *Too Black, Too Strong* (Bloodaxe Books 2001)

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