

Poems on the Underground

40 Poems for 40 Years



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FOREWORD

For forty years, Poems on the Underground has celebrated the rich diversity of our capital's culture.

These verses – like our city – reflect cultures from around the world, showcase London's literary heritage, and celebrate the work of some of the finest poets living and working in Britain today.

In the 1980s, author and Londoner Judith Chernaik came up with a brilliant idea: Why not put poems in empty advertising space on the Tube? After meeting with Joe Putnam, the London Underground's Advertising Manager, a first set of poems was put in place, featuring verses from classic British poets like Percy Bysshe Shelley and Robert Burns, as well as contemporary writers like Seamus Heaney and Grace Nichols.

Forty years on, Poems on the Underground has become a beloved part of the Tube for many Londoners, offering an unexpected moment to pause and reflect during the hustle and bustle of their daily journeys.

It has gone on to inspire similar programmes in transport systems around the world – from Paris to New York, Beijing to Moscow – bringing the love and joy of poetry to millions of people across the globe. The poems found in this leaflet are just a selection of the 700 that have been displayed on London's trains over the last forty years. They are a reminder of the extraordinary creative energy that can be found in our city – not only on our trains, but in our libraries, museums, theatres and venues – where literature, plays and the spoken word continue to thrive.

Here's to many more years of Poems on the Underground and the joy it brings to Londoners, and to many more years of celebrating the incredible culture and creativity that make our city special and a place for everyone.

Sir Sadiq Khan
Mayor Of London

INTRODUCTION

Poems on the Underground has been offering poems of all times and places to a mass public since 1986. This selection represents a small part of the 700 poems which have been displayed on London's Underground cars. The themes of poets from Shakespeare's time to our own recur: love, the natural world, society past and present, poetry itself. We hope the poems appeal to new readers as well as dedicated poetry-lovers.

All the poems displayed on the Tube during our 40 years can be accessed in their original poster form on our website: www.poemsontheunderground.org
A recent selection of posters is available from The Poetry Society (poetrysociety.org.uk). Further information is available in our Archive, held at Cambridge University Library, fully catalogued and available to readers.

We are generously supported by Transport for London [TfL], Arts Council England and the British Council, which distributes our poems to their offices abroad, where they have inspired displays of poetry on transport systems in Paris, New York, Helsinki, Warsaw, Beijing, Sao Paulo and many other cities.

We are grateful to TfL for enabling us to produce free copies of this leaflet. Copies can be obtained from London Underground stations, the Poetry Society, the National Poetry Library, and London Transport Museum. A revised edition of our first published collection, 100 Poems on the Underground, featuring the poems displayed during our first five years, is available from the publisher (www.poetrybusiness.co.uk) and all good bookshops.

The Editors
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I AM RAFTERY THE POET

I am Raftery the poet,
full of hope and love;
with eyes without light,
with gentleness without misery.

Going west on my journey
with the light of my heart;
weak and tired
to the end of my road.

I am now,
and my back to a wall,
playing music
to empty pockets.

Lady Augusta Gregory

translated from the Irish of Antoine O' Raifteiri

WHAT IS TRUTH?

What is truth? says Pilate,
Waits for no answer;
Double your stakes, says the clock
To the ageing dancer;
Double the guard, says Authority,
Treble the bars;
Holes in the sky, says the child
Scanning the stars.

Louis MacNeice

STATIONERY

The moon did not become the sun.
It just fell on the desert
In great sheets, reams
Of silver handmade by you.
The night is your cottage industry now.
The day is your brisk emporium.
The world is full of paper.

Write to me.

Agha Shahid Ali

HE WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B. Yeats

HONESTY

So pure and still a purple
breathing at dusk from the tall mantles
ruined into paper coins
and helpless see-through tears of honesty...

Kit Wright

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

MUSIC, WHEN SOFT VOICES DIE

To Emilia V

Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory –
Odours, when sweet violets sicken,
Live within the sense they quicken.

Rose leaves, when the rose is dead,
Are heaped for the beloved's bed –
And so thy thoughts, when thou art gone,
Love itself shall slumber on . . .

Percy Bysshe Shelley

THE PRESENT

For the present there is just one moon,
though every level pond gives back another.

But the bright disc shining in the black lagoon,
perceived by astrophysicist and lover,

is milliseconds old. And even that light's
seven minutes older than its source.

And the stars we think we see on moonless nights
are long extinguished. And, of course,

this very moment, as you read this line,
is literally gone before you know it.

Forget the here-and-now. We have no time
but this device of wantonness and wit.

Make me this present then: your hand in mine,
and we'll live out our lives in it.

Michael Donaghy

JOHN ANDERSON MY JO

John Anderson my jo, John,
When we were first acquent,
Your locks were like the raven,
Your bonie brow was brent;
But now your brow is beld, John,
Your locks are like the snaw;
But blessings on your frosty pow,
John Anderson my jo.

John Anderson my jo, John,
We clamb the hill the gither;
And mony a canty day, John,
We've had wi' ane anither:
Now we maun totter down, John,
But hand in hand we'll go,
And sleep the gither at the foot,
John Anderson my jo.

Robert Burns

A 14-YEAR-OLD CONVALESCENT CAT IN THE WINTER

I want him to have another living summer,
to lie in the sun and enjoy the *douceur de vivre* –
because the sun, like golden rum in a rummer,
is what makes an idle cat *un tout petit peu ivre* –

I want him to lie stretched out, contented,
revelling in the heat, his fur all dry and warm,
an Old Age Pensioner, retired, resented
by no one, and happinesses in a beelike swarm

to settle on him – postponed for another season
that last fated hateful journey to the vet
from which there is no return (and age the reason),
which must soon come – as I cannot forget.

Gavin Ewart

LONDON FIELDS

Evening falls between the trees
The drumming for Ghana fills the leaves

The wicket falls
High fives all round
Conkers shining in their nests
Mr Softee pulls away
She makes love to her mobile
So happy he's called

Here a plane tree
Higher than a warehouse
Thicker than a rubbish bin
Stronger than a promise
Older than a Town hall

Evening falls between the trees
The drumming for Ghana fills the leaves

Michael Rosen

GREEN THE LAND OF MY POEM

Green the land of my poem is green and high
Slowly I tell it slowly with the grace of a seagull
riding the waves on the book of water
I bequeath it written down to the one who asks to
whom shall we sing when salt poisons the dew?
Green I write it on prose of wheat in the book of
fields
stalks bending with our weight
Whenever I befriended or became a brother to an
ear of wheat
annihilation and its opposite taught me survival
I am the grain that died and became green again
there is something of life in death

Mahmoud Darwish

translated by Rema Hammami and John Berger

THE PLACE WHERE WE ARE RIGHT

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

Yehuda Amichai

translated by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell

ONE ART

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

-Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Elizabeth Bishop

THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

Everything except language
knows the meaning of existence.
Trees, planets, rivers, time
know nothing else. They express it
moment by moment as the universe.

Even this fool of a body
lives it in part, and would
have full dignity within it
but for the ignorant freedom
of my talking mind.

Les Murray

I AM THE SONG

I am the song that sings the bird.
I am the leaf that grows the land.
I am the tide that moves the moon.
I am the stream that halts the sand.
I am the cloud that drives the storm.
I am the earth that lights the sun.
I am the fire that strikes the stone.
I am the clay that shapes the hand.
I am the word that speaks the man.

Charles Causley

from SIDETRACKS

I am you a stranger on the sidetracks
waiting for the season to harvest blades of light
sending letters though tomorrow has no address

Bei Dao

translated by Jeffrey Yang

DIARY

Her diary
the way the words hurry
intoeachother
and then
apart-
as the days and her body
lost out

I took the diary from her bedside
did nothing else
no sorting of clothes
touched nothing
of hers
save the diary, reading

how she wrote across days
and off the edge
of the page

Katrina Naomi

FEAR

I fear the vast dimensions of eternity.
I fear the gap between the platform and the train.
I fear the onset of a murderous campaign.
I fear the palpitations caused by too much tea.

I fear the drawn pistol of a rapparee.
I fear the books will not survive the acid rain.
I fear the ruler and the blackboard and the cane.
I fear the Jabberwock, whatever it might be.

I fear the bad decisions of a referee.
I fear the only recourse is to plead insane.
I fear the implications of a lawyer's fee.

I fear the gremlins that have colonized my brain.
I fear to read the small print of the guarantee.
And what else do I fear? Let me begin again.

Ciaran Carson

SEED

The first warm day of spring
and I step out into the garden from the gloom
of a house where hope had died
to tally the storm damage, to seek what may
have survived. And finding some forgotten
lupins I'd sown from seed last autumn
holding in their fingers a raindrop each
like a peace offering, or a promise,
I am suddenly grateful and would
offer a prayer if I believed in God.
But not believing, I bless the power of seed,
its casual, useful persistence,
and bless the power of sun,
its conspiracy with the underground,
and thank my stars the winter's ended.

Paula Meehan

BAM CHI CHI LA LA

In Jamaica she was a teacher. Here, she is a
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

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

If we become separated from each other
this evening try to remember the last time
you saw me and go back and wait for me there.
I promise I won't be very long,
though I am haunted by the feeling
that I might keep missing you,
with the noise of the city growing too
loud and the day burning out so quickly.
But let's just say it's as good a plan as any.

Just once let's imagine a word for the memory
that lives beyond the body, that circles
and sets all things alight. For I have
singled you out from the whole world,
and I would – even as this darkness
is falling, even when the night comes
where there are no more words, and the day
comes when there is no more light.

Leanne O'Sullivan

TIME TO BE SLOW

This is the time to be slow,
Lie low to the wall
Until the bitter weather passes.

Try, as best you can, not to let
The wire brush of doubt
Scrape from your heart
All sense of yourself
And your hesitant light.

If you remain generous,
Time will come good;
And you will find your feet
Again on fresh pastures of promise,
Where the air will be kind
And blushed with beginning.

John O'Donohue

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

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

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, wreathe
Dry thatch in wood-smoke. Laden stalks
Ride the germ's decay – we await
The promise of the rust.

Wole Soyinka

EVERYTHING CHANGES

Everything changes. We plant
trees for those born later
but what's happened has happened,
and poisons poured into the seas
cannot be drained out again.

What's happened has happened.
Poisons poured into the seas
cannot be drained out again, but
everything changes. We plant
trees for those born later.

Cicely Herbert

FOR THE LIFE OF THIS PLANET

The way the red sun surrenders
its wholeness to curving ocean
bit by bit. The way curving ocean
gives birth to the birth of stars
in the growing darkness,
wearing everything in its path
to cosmic smoothness.

The impulse of stones rolling
towards their own roundness.
The unexpected comets of flying fish.
And Forest, Great-Breathing-Spirit,
rooting to the very end
for the life of this planet.

Grace Nichols

FOR MY WIFE, READING IN BED

I know we're living through all the dark we can
afford.

Thank goodness, then, for this moment's light

and you, holding the night at bay – a hint of frown,
those focussed hands, that open book.

I'll match your inward quiet, breath for breath.

What else do we have but words and their absences

to bind and unfasten the knotwork of the heart;
to remind us how mutual and alone we are, how tiny

and significant? Whatever it is you are reading now
my love, read on. Our lives depend on it.

John Glenday

SIX BELLS

*(for the forty four miners killed in the explosion
on 28 June 1960)*

Perhaps a woman hanging out the wash
paused, hearing something, a sudden hush,
a pulse inside the earth like a blow to the heart,
holding in her arms the wet weight
of her wedding sheets, his shirts. Perhaps
heads lifted from the work of scrubbing steps,
hands stilled from wringing rainbows onto slate,
while below the town, deep in the pit
a rock-fall struck a spark from steel, and fired
the void, punched through the mine a fist
of blazing firedamp. As they died,
perhaps a silence, before sirens cried,
before the people gathered in the street,
before she'd finished hanging out her sheets.

Gillian Clarke

PRAYER

Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer
utters itself. So, a woman will lift
her head from the sieve of her hands and stare
at the minims sung by a tree, a sudden gift.

Some nights, although we are faithless, the truth
enters our hearts, that small familiar pain;
then a man will stand stock-still, hearing his youth
in the distant Latin chanting of a train.

Pray for us now. Grade 1 piano scales
console the lodger looking out across
a Midlands town. Then dusk, and someone calls
a child's name as though they named their loss.

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer –
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

Carol Ann Duffy

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were,
as well as if a manor of thy friends
or of thine own were.

Any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.

John Donne

THE RED COCKATOO

Sent as a present from Annam –
A red cockatoo.
Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,
Speaking with the speech of men.

And they did to it what is always done
To the learned and eloquent.
They took a cage with stout bars
And shut it up inside.

Po Chü-i

translated by Arthur Waley

from KING LEAR

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

William Shakespeare

EPITAPH ON A TYRANT

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with
 laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the
 streets.

January 1939

W. H. Auden

INSCRIPTION FOR A WAR

*Stranger, go tell the Spartan
We died here obedient to their commands*

INSCRIPTION AT THERMOPYLAE

Linger not, stranger. Shed no tear.
Go back to those who sent us here.

We are the young they drafted out
To wars their folly brought about.

Go tell those old men, safe in bed,
We took their orders and are dead.

A. D. Hope

I TAKE INTO MY ARMS MORE THAN I CAN BEAR TO HOLD

I take into my arms more than I can bear to hold
I am toppled by the world
a creation of ladders, pianos, stairs cut into the rock
a devouring world of teeth where even the common
 snail
eats the heart out of a forest
as you and I do, who are human, at night

yet still I take into my arms more than I can bear to
 hold

Janet Frame

WON'T YOU CELEBRATE WITH ME

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?

i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

Lucille Clifton

AND YET THE BOOKS

And yet the books will be there on the shelves,
 separate beings,
That appeared once, still wet
As shining chestnuts under a tree in autumn,
And, touched, cuddled, began to live
In spite of fires on the horizon, castles blown up,
Tribes on the march, planets in motion.
“We are,” they said, even as their pages
Were being torn out, or a buzzing flame
Licked away their letters. So much more durable
Than we are, whose frail warmth
Cools down with memory, disperses, perishes.
I imagine the earth when I am no more:
Nothing happens, no loss, it’s still a strange
 pageant,
Women’s dresses, dewy lilacs, a song in the valley.
Yet the books will be there on the shelves, well
 born,
Derived from people, but also from radiance,
 heights.

Czeslaw Milosz

translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass

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