

British Empire Poems of the 20th Century

1917 Wilfred Owen - Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
 And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

1918 Siegfried Sassoon – Suicide in the Trenches

I knew a simple soldier boy
 Who grinned at life in empty joy,
 Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
 And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
 With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
 He put a bullet through his brain.
 No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
 Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
 Sneak home and pray you'll never know
 The hell where youth and laughter go.

1919 William Butler Yeats - To a Young Girl

My dear, my dear, I know
 More than another
 What makes your heart beat so;
 Not even your own mother
 Can know it as I know,
 Who broke my heart for her
 When the wild thought,
 That she denies

And has forgot,
Set all her blood astir
And glittered in her eyes.

1919 William Butler Yeats - The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

1920 T.S. Eliot - The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

(Excerpt)

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question .
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

.....There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--

Do I dare

Disturb the universe?
 In a minute there is time
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will
 reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall
 Beneath the music from a farther room.
 So how should I presume?

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
 I am no prophet--and here's no great matter;
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and
 snicker,
 And in short, I was afraid.....

1929 Hilaire Belloc - Tarantella

Do you remember an Inn,
 Miranda?
 Do you remember an Inn?
 And the tedding and the spreading
 Of the straw for a bedding,
 And the fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees,
 And the wine that tasted of tar?
 And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers
 (Under the vine of the dark verandah)?
 Do you remember an Inn, Miranda,
 Do you remember an Inn?
 And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers

Who hadn't got a penny,
 And who weren't paying any,
 And the hammer at the doors and the Din?
 And the Hip! Hop! Hap!
 Of the clap
 Of the hands to the twirl and the swirl
 Of the girl gone chancing,
 Glancing, Dancing,
 Backing and advancing,
 Snapping of a clapper to the spin
 Out and in --
 And the Ting, Tong, Tang, of the Guitar.
 Do you remember an Inn, Miranda?
 Do you remember an Inn?
 Never more;
 Miranda, Never more.
 Only the high peaks hoar:
 And Aragon a torrent at the door.
 No sound
 In the walls of the Halls where falls
 The tread
 Of the feet of the dead to the ground
 No sound:
 But the boom
 Of the far Waterfall like Doom.

1931 W.H. Auden - Five Songs (II)

That night when joy began
 Our narrowest veins to flush,
 We waited for the flash
 Of morning's levelled gun.

But morning let us pass,
 And day by day relief
 Outgrows his nervous laugh,
 Grown credulous of peace,

As mile by mile is seen
 No trespasser's reproach,
 And love's best glasses reach
 No fields but are his own.

1931 E. J. Pratt – Erosion

It took the sea a thousand years,
 A thousand years to trace
 The granite features of this cliff,
 In crag and scarp and base.

It took the sea an hour one night,
 An hour of storm to place
 The sculpture of these granite seams
 Upon a woman's face.

1937 John Betjeman – Slough

Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!
 It isn't fit for humans now,
 There isn't grass to graze a cow.
 Swarm over, Death!

Come, bombs and blow to smithereens
 Those air -conditioned, bright canteens,
 Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans,

Tinned minds, tinned breath.

Mess up the mess they call a town-
 A house for ninety-seven down
 And once a week a half a crown
 For twenty years.

And get that man with double chin
 Who'll always cheat and always win,
 Who washes his repulsive skin
 In women's tears:

And smash his desk of polished oak
 And smash his hands so used to stroke
 And stop his boring dirty joke
 And make him yell.

But spare the bald young clerks who add
 The profits of the stinking cad;
 It's not their fault that they are mad,
 They've tasted Hell.

It's not their fault they do not know
 The birdsong from the radio,
 It's not their fault they often go
 To Maidenhead

And talk of sport and makes of cars
 In various bogus-Tudor bars
 And daren't look up and see the stars
 But belch instead.

In labor-saving homes, with care

Their wives frizz out peroxide hair
 And dry it in synthetic air
 And paint their nails.

Come, friendly bombs and fall on Slough
 To get it ready for the plough.
 The cabbages are coming now;
 The earth exhales.

1951 Dylan Thomas - Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night

Do not go gentle into that good night,
 Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
 Because their words had forked no lightning they
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
 Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
 And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
 Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
 Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

1951 Adrienne Rich - Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
 Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
 They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
 They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.
 Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
 Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
 The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
 Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.
 When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
 Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
 The tigers in the panel that she made
 Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

1952 Raymond Souster - The Man Who Finds That His Son Has Become a Thief

Coming into the store at first angry
 At the accusation, believing in
 The word of his boy who has told him:
 I didn't steal anything, honest.

Then becoming calmer, seeing that anger
 Will not help in the business, listening painfully
 As the other's evidence unfolds, so painfully slow.

Then seeing gradually that evidence

Almost as if tightening slowly around the neck
 Of his son, at first vaguely circumstantial, then gathering damage,
 Until there is present the unmistakable odor of guilt
 Which seeps now into the mind and lays its poison.

Suddenly feeling sick and alone and afraid,
 As if an unseen hand had slapped him in the face
 For no reason whatsoever: wanting to get out
 Into the street, the night, the darkness, anywhere to hide
 The pain that must show in the face to these strangers, the fear.

It must be like this.
 It could hardly be otherwise.

1958 Louis Dudek - Poetry for Intellectuals

If you say in a poem "grass is green,"
 They all ask, "What did you mean?"

"That nature is ignorant," you reply;
 "On a deeper 'level' - youth must die."

If you say in a poem "grass is red."
 They understand what you have said.

1958 Alden Nowlan - Warren Pryor

When every pencil meant a sacrifice
 his parents boarded him at school in town,

slaving to free him from the stony fields,
 the meager acreage that bore them down.

They blushed with pride when, at his graduation,
 they watched him picking up the slender scroll,
 his passport from the years of brutal toil
 and lonely patience in a barren hole.

When he went in the Bank their cups ran over.
 They marveled how he wore a milk-white shirt
 work days and jeans on Sundays. He was saved
 from their thistle-strewn farm and its red dirt.

And he said nothing. Hard and serious
 like a young bear inside his teller's cage,
 his axe-hewn hands upon the paper bills
 aching with empty strength and throttled rage.

1955 Philip Larkin - Church Going

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
 Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
 From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-

Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
 Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
 Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
 "Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.
 The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
 I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
 Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
 And always end much at a loss like this,
 Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
 When churches fall completely out of use
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,
 Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

A shape less recognizable each week,
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek
 This place for what it was; one of the crew
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
 Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
 Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
 Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
 Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt

So long and equably what since is found
 Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
 And death, and thoughts of these - for whom was built
 This special shell? For, though I've no idea
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
 Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
 And that much never can be obsolete,
 Since someone will forever be surprising
 A hunger in himself to be more serious,
 And gravitating with it to this ground,
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
 If only that so many dead lie round.

1961 Philip Larkin - Breadfruit

Boys dream of native girls who bring breadfruit,
 Whatever they are,
 As bribes to teach them how to execute
 Sixteen sexual positions on the sand;
 This makes them join (the boys) the tennis club,
 Jive at the Mecca, use deodorants, and
 On Saturdays squire ex-schoolgirls to the pub
 By private car.

Such uncorrected visions end in church
 Or registrar:
 A mortgaged semi- with a silver birch;
 Nippers; the widowed mum; having to scheme

With money; illness; age. So absolute
 Maturity falls, when old men sit and dream
 Of naked native girls who bring breadfruit
 Whatever they are.

1966 Seamus Heaney – Digging

Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
 When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
 My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
 Bends low, comes up twenty years away
 Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
 Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
 Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
 He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
 To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
 Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
 Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
 Than any other man on Toner's bog.
 Once I carried him milk in a bottle
 Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up

To drink it, then fell to right away
 Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
 Over his shoulder, going down and down
 For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mold, the squelch and slap
 Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
 Through living roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.

1969 Joni Mitchell - Woodstock

I came upon a child of God
 He was walking along the road
 And I asked him where are you going
 And this he told me
 I'm going on down to Yasgur's farm
 I'm going to join in a rock 'n' roll band
 I'm going to camp out on the land
 I'm going to try an' get my soul free

We are stardust
 We are golden
 And we've got to get ourselves
 Back to the garden

Then can I walk beside you
 I have come here to lose the smog

And I feel to be a cog in something turning
 Well maybe it is just the time of year
 Or maybe it's the time of man
 I don't know who I am
 But you know life is for learning

We are stardust
 We are golden
 And we've got to get ourselves
 Back to the garden

By the time we got to Woodstock
 We were half a million strong
 And everywhere there was song and celebration
 And I dreamed I saw the bombers
 Riding shotgun in the sky
 And they were turning into butterflies
 Above our nation

We are stardust
 Billion year old carbon
 We are golden
 Caught in the devil's bargain
 And we've got to get ourselves
 back to the garden

1971 Margaret Atwood – You Fit Into Me

You fit into me
 like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
 an open eye

1973 Eli Mandel – Agatha Christie

Being civil she saw poison
 As a flaw in character
 And the use of a knife
 A case study in Freud

Difficult to explain
 Her dislike of Jews
 Or why night upon night
 She plotted solutions
 To deaths she must have dreamed

Her 200,000,000 readers
 How much longing for murder
 The neatness of England
 Is and still remains

Though in Belfast, say,
 Bombs have other reasons
 And no one explains

1979 Craig Raine - A Martian Sends a Postcard Home

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings
 and some are treasured for their markings--

they cause the eyes to melt
 or the body to shriek without pain.

I have never seen one fly, but

sometimes they perch on the hand.

Mist is when the sky is tired of flight
and rests its soft machine on the ground:

then the world is dim and bookish
like engravings under tissue paper.

Rain is when the earth is television.
It has the properties of making colors darker.

Model T is a room with the lock inside --
a key is turned to free the world

for movement, so quick there is a film
to watch for anything missed.

But time is tied to the wrist
or kept in a box, ticking with impatience.

In homes, a haunted apparatus sleeps,
that snores when you pick it up.

If the ghost cries, they carry it
to their lips and soothe it to sleep

with sounds. And yet, they wake it up
deliberately, by tickling with a finger.

Only the young are allowed to suffer
openly. Adults go to a punishment room

with water but nothing to eat.

They lock the door and suffer the noises

alone. No one is exempt
and everyone's pain has a different smell.

At night, when all the colors die,
they hide in pairs

and read about themselves --
in color, with their eyelids shut.

1979 Leonard Cohen - Bird On The Wire

Like a bird on the wire,
like a drunk in a midnight choir
I have tried in my way to be free.
Like a worm on a hook,
like a knight from some old fashioned book
I have saved all my ribbons for thee.

If I, if I have been unkind,
I hope that you can just let it go by.
If I, if I have been untrue
I hope you know it was never to you.

Like a baby, stillborn,
like a beast with his horn
I have torn everyone who reached out for me.
But I swear by this song
and by all that I have done wrong
I will make it all up to thee.

I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch,

he said to me, "You must not ask for so much."
 And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door,
 she cried to me, "Hey, why not ask for more?"
 Like a bird on the wire,
 like a drunk in a midnight choir
 I have tried in my way to be free.

1985 John Agard - Listen Mr Oxford don

Me not no Oxford don
 me a simple immigrant
 from Clapham Common
 I didn't graduate
 I immigrate

But listen Mr Oxford don
 I'm a man on de run
 and a man on de run
 is a dangerous one

I ent have no gun
 I ent have no knife
 but mugging de Queen's English
 is the story of my life

I dont need no axe
 to split/ up yu syntax
 I dont need no hammer
 to mash/ up yu grammar

I warning you Mr Oxford don
 I'm a wanted man

and a wanted man
 is a dangerous one

Dem accuse me of assault
 on de Oxford dictionary/
 imagine a concise peaceful man like me/
 dem want me serve time
 for inciting rhyme to riot
 but I rekking it quiet
 down here in Clapham Common

I'm not a violent man Mr Oxford don
 I only armed wit mih human breath
 but human breath
 is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me
 I ent serving no jail sentence
 I slashing suffix in self defence
 I bashing future wit present tense
 and if necessary

I making de Queen's English accessory/ to my offence

1991 Don Walker - The Year That He Was Cool

I can see him by the poolroom door
 In 1965
 Answering only to his sweet law
 Deadpan and alive
 He could surf the curl on a barmaid's lip
 He could surf a yard of beer

He surfed the break down the Queensland coast
 For six months of that year
 Back in a time of innocence
 He did not suffer fools
 He put aside all childish things
 In the year that he was cool

They said he'd screwed a meter maid
 The girls said it wasn't true
 He knew a guy who knew Pete Zuber
 From "The Shades of Blue"
 Many of the same girls claimed to have spent
 The night in his panel van
 He'd shake his head and we'd admire
 The politeness of the man
 They said he'd smoked raw opium
 The line was hard to rule
 Between the facts and legend in
 The year that he was cool

Now it's hard to believe how twenty-five years
 Has underlined that face
 Undermined that special time
 That ties him to his place
 To see his eyes it's hard to say
 Just when the lights were drowned
 There ain't much else to do besides decay
 In this six-pack town

Now he's seen all the pricks who stayed at school
 Come home with law degrees
 The girls who once were his to choose

Have traveled overseas
 And he harbors such a hatred
 He drinks in such a rage
 But the target's hard to focus on
 Approaching middle age
 Now he stands outside the bowling club
 Barfing like a mule
 No one recalls or wants to know
 About the year that he was cool