

London

Poems on the Underground



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London

Poems on the Underground

edited by
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POEMS ON THE UNDERGROUND

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FOREWORD

I am delighted to introduce *Poems on the Underground's* latest anthology, which helps mark our 150th anniversary year by celebrating London's rich social and cultural heritage and transport's dynamic role in supporting its growth.

When the first train of the Metropolitan Railway ran beneath the streets between Paddington and Farringdon in 1863 it brought a revolution in how people understood and related to the city. Since then London has grown in no small part as a direct result of the expansion of the London Underground network. I am delighted that *Poems on the Underground* a bit like the Tube itself has become firmly established as part of our contribution to London's life!

Each poem has appeared already this year on our trains. Perhaps you have seen some of them across the breadth of London, passing many of the sites – and sights – they so wonderfully capture. I hope you enjoy them brought together on the printed page, their varied voices a small sample of the millions of stories that unfold here every day.

Mike Brown, MVO
Managing Director, London Underground

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Thankyou London Underground

Tufnell Park and Camden Town
Where Air Raid huddles laid them down.
Neasden, Willesden, Dollis Hill,
Tottenham Hale and Hearty, still.
Thankyou London Underground,
And all your staff, who get me round. . . .

Here's to the gaps, the maps
And the elapse of a hundred and fifty years
since that first
Steaming monster hurled
Through its Metropolitan Minotaur world.
To all the billiard ball-bottomed straps onto
which I've hung.
And here's to the police officer, who, when I
was illegally busking outside Westminster
Station, approached me and said,
'Do you know any Neil Young?'

John Hegley

from Summoned by Bells

Great was my joy, with London at my feet –
All London mine, five shillings in my hand
And not expected back till after tea!
Great was our joy, Ronald Hughes Wright's
and mine,
To travel by the Underground all day
Between the rush hours, so that very soon
There was no station, north to Finsbury Park,
To Barking eastwards, Clapham Common
south,
No temporary platform in the west
Among the Actons and the Ealings, where
We had not once alighted.

John Betjeman

Our Meetings

As in the Underground there's no mistaking
the train's approach, it pushes air ahead,
whirls paper, the line sings, a sort-of dread
suffusing longing and my platform shaking –
so it is before our every meeting,
till you arrive. Hear how my heart is beating!

Andrew Waterman

Stations

As he travels home on the Northern Line
he is reviewing his marriage.

When he used to tell her that he loved her
it was certainly true: but now the words –

though they still fulfil a useful and ceremonial
purpose – have lost some of their resonance,

as in *Barons Court* or *St John's Wood*
or the beautiful *Shepherd's Bush*.

Connie Bensley

Spooner Goes Under

Stamp Head	Lancery Chain
Wedge Air	Man Store
Stooge Greet	Hotford Why Street
Shammer Myth	Hottenham Tail
Flak Briars	Gradbroke Love
Straker Beat	Horeditch Shy Street
Paint Saul's	Ratimer Load
Very Pale	Hanor Mouse
Poor Mark	Barry Le Moan
Moston Banner	Site Witty
Sickadilly Purchase	Hagenham Deathway
Pregent's Ark	State on Loan
Gaul Date	Booting Tech
Chat on Ross	Rolled Hawk Glowed
Grounds Bean	I'll Mend
Breast Wompton	Reverend Spooner's
Bulham Fraudway	trip Underground
Garcons Preen	Comes to an end

Brian O'Connor

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

Like a Beacon

In London
every now and then
I get this craving
for my mother's food
I leave art galleries
in search of plantains
saltfish/sweet potatoes

I need this link

I need this touch
of home
swinging my bag
like a beacon
against the cold

Grace Nichols

Staff choice

Bam Chi Chi La La: London, 1969

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

Gherkin Music

Walk the spiral
up out of the pavement
into your own reflection, into
transparency, into the space

where flat planes are curves
and you are transposed
as you go higher into a thought

of flying, joining the game
of brilliance and scattering
where fragments of poems,

words, names fall like glory
into the lightwells until
St Mary Axe is brimming

Jo Shapcott

The Conversation of Old Men

He feels a breeze rise from
the Thames, as far off
as Rotherhithe, in
intimate contact with
water, slimy hulls,
dark wood greenish
at waterline – touching
then leaving what it
lightly touches; he
goes on talking, and this is
the life of wind on water.

Thom Gunn

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

At Lord's

It is little I repair to the matches of the
 Southron folk,
 Though my own red roses there may blow;
It is little I repair to the matches of the
 Southron folk,
 Though the red roses crest the caps, I know.
For the field is full of shades as I near the
 shadowy coast,
And a ghostly batsman plays to the bowling of
 a ghost,
And I look through my tears on a soundless
 – clapping host
As the run-stealers flicker to and fro,
 To and fro: –
O my Hornby and my Barlow long ago!

Francis Thompson

Vacillation

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top.

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessèd and could bless.

W.B. Yeats

Buses in the Strand

The Strand is beautiful with buses,
Fat and majestic in form,
Red like tomatoes in their trusses
In August, when the sun is warm.

They cluster in the builded chasm,
Corpulent fruit, a hundred strong,
And now and then a secret spasm
Spurs them a yard or two along.

Scarlet and portly and seraphic,
Contented in the summer's prime,
They beam among the jumbled
traffic,
Patiently ripening with time,

Till, with a final jerk and rumble,
The Strand tomatoes, fat and fair,
Roll past the traffic lights and tumble
Gleefully down Trafalgar Square.

R.P. Lister

Ballad of the Londoner

Evening falls on the smoky walls,
And the railings drip with rain,
And I will cross the old river
To see my girl again.

The great and solemn-gliding tram,
Love's still-mysterious car,
Has many a light of gold and white,
And a single dark red star.

I know a garden in a street
Which no one ever knew;
I know a rose beyond the Thames
Where flowers are pale and few.

James Elroy Flecker

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

from Jerusalem

The fields from Islington to
Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold,
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Pancrass & Kentish-town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upon the starry sky.

The Jew's-harp-house & the Green
Man,
The Ponds where Boys to bathe delight,
The fields of Cows by Willan's farm,
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.

William Blake

In the Heart of Hackney

Behold, a swan. Ten houseboats on the
Lee.
A cyclist on the towpath. Gentle rain.
A pigeon in a white apple-blossoming tree.
And through the Marsh the rumble of
a train.

Two courting geese waddle on the bank
Croaking. A man unties his boat.
Police cars howl and whoop. And vast and
blank
The rain cloud of the sky is trampled
underfoot.

Behold, a dove. And in Bomb Crater Pond
Fat frogs ignore the rain.
Each trembling rush signals like a wand
Earthing the magic of London once
again.

In the heart of Hackney, five miles from
Kentish Town,
By Lammas Lands the reed beds are
glowing rich and brown.

Sebastian Barker

Composed upon Westminster Bridge September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

William Wordsworth

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