

Poems on the Underground

30 YEARS

1986-2016

30 POEMS



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FOREWORD

This leaflet opens with the poems which launched Poems on the Underground in 1986, verses by poets famous and relatively unknown. It all started as an idea shared by a few friends – the writer Judith Chernaik and poets Gerard Benson and Cicely Herbert. How pleasant it would be, they thought, to read a few favourite lines of poetry on the Tube, in among the adverts for temps and toothpaste. London Underground responded generously, and the programme was launched at Aldwych on a cold wet January morning.

The programme has thrived ever since, with old songs and Elizabethan sonnets joining contemporary work from across the world. As proof that poetry belongs naturally in public spaces, similar displays of poems on public transport have taken place in Dublin, New York, Paris, Barcelona, Stockholm, Helsinki, St Petersburg, Shanghai and beyond.

The poems which follow are a selection from over 500 poems which have been featured on the Tube since 1986.

I hope you enjoy reading them as you travel around the Underground network as much as we did putting this collection together.

Nick Brown
Managing Director, London Underground
and London Rail

CONTENTS

Robert Burns: Up in the Morning Early	4
Percy Bysshe Shelley: Ozymandias	5
William Carlos Williams: This Is Just to Say	6
Seamus Heaney: The Railway Children	7
Grace Nichols: Like a Beacon	8
William Shakespeare: Sonnet 18	9
Faustin Charles: Viv	10
James Berry: Benediction	11
Moniza Alvi: Arrival 1946	12
Fleur Adcock: Immigrant	12
Iain Crichton Smith: The Exiles	13
Carol Ann Duffy: Prayer	14
Cicely Herbert: Everything Changes	15
Anne Stevenson: Ragwort	16
David Constantine: Coltsfoot and Larches	16
Kathleen Raine: Dream	17
Kamau Brathwaite: Naima	18
Adrian Mitchell: Goodbye	19
Edward Thomas: In Memoriam (Easter 1915)	19
Frances Leviston: Industrial	19
Anon: Western Wind	20
Robert Graves: Love Without Hope	20
Philip Larkin: The Trees	21
W.B. Yeats: Her Anxiety	22
Robert Herrick: Dreams	23

Gerard Benson: Riddle	23
Palladas, translated by Tony Harrison: Loving the Rituals	24
William Langland: <i>from</i> The Vision of Piers Plowman	24
Czeslaw Milosz: And Yet the Books	25
John Keats: Lines <i>from</i> Endymion	26
Acknowledgements	28

UP IN THE MORNING EARLY

Cauld blaws the wind frae east to west,
The drift is driving sairly;
Sae loud and shrill's I hear the blast,
I'm sure it's winter fairly.

CHORUS: Up in the morning's no for me,
Up in the morning early;
When a' the hills are cover'd wi' snaw,
I'm sure it's winter fairly.

The birds sit chittering in the thorn,
A' day they fare but sparely;
And lang's the night frae e'en to morn,
I'm sure it's winter fairly.

CHORUS: Up in the morning's no for me,
Up in the morning early;
When a' the hills are cover'd wi' snaw,
I'm sure it's winter fairly.

Robert Burns

OZYMANDIAS

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lips, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless
things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart
that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Percy Bysshe Shelley

THIS IS JUST TO SAY

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

William Carlos Williams

THE RAILWAY CHILDREN

When we climbed the slopes of the cutting
We were eye-level with the white cups
Of the telegraph poles and the sizzling wires.

Like lovely freehand they curved for miles
East and miles west beyond us, sagging
Under their burden of swallows.

We were small and thought we knew nothing
Worth knowing. We thought words travelled
the wires
In the shiny pouches of raindrops,

Each one seeded full with the light
Of the sky, the gleam of the lines, and ourselves
So infinitesimally scaled

We could stream through the eye of a needle.

Seamus Heaney

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

SONNET 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course,
 untrimmed;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his
 shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
 So long as men can breathe, or eyes can
 see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

William Shakespeare

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

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

ARRIVAL 1946

The boat docked in at Liverpool.
From the train Tariq stared
at an unbroken line of washing
from the North West to Euston.

These are strange people, he thought –
an Empire, and all this washing,
the underwear, the Englishman's garden.
It was Monday, and very sharp.

Moniza Alvi

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

THE EXILES

The many ships that left our country
with white wings for Canada.
They are like handkerchiefs in our memories
and the brine like tears
and in their masts sailors singing
like birds on branches.
That sea of May running in such blue,
a moon at night, a sun at daytime,
and the moon like a yellow fruit,
like a plate on a wall
to which they raise their hands
like a silver magnet
with piercing rays
streaming into the heart.

Iain Crichton Smith

translated from the author's own Gaelic

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 I 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

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

RAGWORT

They won't let railways alone, those yellow
flowers.

They're that remorseless joy of dereliction
darkest banks exhale like vivid breath
as bricks divide to let them root between.
How every falling place concocts their smile,
taking what's left and making a song of it.

Anne Stevenson

COLTSFOOT AND LARCHES

I love coltsfoot that they
Make their appearance into life among dead
grass;
Larches, that they
Die colourfully among sombre immortals.

David Constantine

DREAM

I am become a stranger to my dreams,
Their places unknown. A bridge there was
Over the lovely waters of the Tyne, my mother
Was with me, we were almost there,
It seemed, but in that almost opened up a valley
Extending and expanding, wind-sculptured
sand;
Dry its paths, a beautiful waterless waste
Without one green leaf, sand-coloured behind
closed eyes.
That film shifts, but the arid place remains
When day returns. Yet we were still going
towards the Tyne,
That green river-side where childhood's flowers
Were growing still, my mother and I, she dead,
With me for ever in that dream.

Kathleen Raine

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

GOODBYE

He breathed in air, he breathed out light.
Charlie Parker was my delight.

Adrian Mitchell

IN MEMORIAM (EASTER 1915)

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men,
Now far from home, who, with their
 sweethearts, should
Have gathered them and will do never again.

Edward Thomas

INDUSTRIAL

From a bridge, the inverted *vanitas*
Of a swan drifting down a black canal
Between two corrugated warehouses.

Frances Leviston

WESTERN WIND

Western wind, when wilt thou blow
The small rain down can rain
Christ that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again

Anon

LOVE WITHOUT HOPE

Love without hope, as when the young bird-
catcher
Swept off his tall hat to the Squire's own
daughter,
So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly
Singing about her head, as she rode by.

Robert Graves

THE TREES

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Philip Larkin

HER ANXIETY

Earth in beauty dressed
Awaits returning spring.
All true love must die,
Alter at the best
Into some lesser thing.
Prove that I lie.

Such body lovers have,
Such exacting breath,
That they touch or sigh.
Every touch they give,
Love is nearer death.
Prove that I lie.

W.B. Yeats

DREAMS

Here we are all, by day; by night we're hurled
By dreams, each one, into a several world.

Robert Herrick

RIDDLE

I was the cause of great troubles,
yet, resting among leaves, I did nothing wrong.
After much waiting I was taken in hand,
passed from one to another.
Broken I moved beyond sharp barriers
and was cradled in wetness, mashed to pulp.
Soon I entered a dark tunnel
where bathed in acids I altered my being.
But what I entered I also altered,
bringing light where there had been darkness.
I brought strife where there had been peace,
pain where there had been comfort.
My journey ended in the place of corruption
but by then I had changed the world.

Gerard Benson

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

from THE VISION OF PIERS PLOWMAN

‘After sharp showers,’ said Peace, ‘the sun
shines brightest;
No weather is warmer than after watery clouds;
Nor any love dearer, or more loving friends,
Than after war and woe, when Love and Peace
are masters.

There was never war in this world, or
wickedness so keen,
That Love, if he liked, could not turn to
laughter,
And Peace, through patience, put an end to all
perils.’

William Langland

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*

LINES *from* ENDYMION

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever;
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet
breathing.

Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits.

John Keats

POEMS ON THE UNDERGROUND

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