

# Poems on the Underground

30 YEARS

*1986-2016*

30 POEMS



Supported by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



**BRITISH  
COUNCIL**

[tfl.gov.uk/poems](https://tfl.gov.uk/poems)

**MAYOR OF LONDON**



**TRANSPORT  
FOR LONDON**  
EVERY JOURNEY MATTERS



## 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

---

Selection copyright

© Poems on the Underground 2016

Poems copyright authors and publishers  
(see Acknowledgements)

First published 2016

Design by The Creative Practice

Back cover image: detail from Charing Cross  
mural by David Gentleman

The Editors thank London Underground,  
Arts Council England and the British Council  
for enabling us to produce and distribute free  
copies of this booklet to mark the  
30th anniversary of Poems on the Underground.

All the poems included here have appeared on  
the Underground between 1986 and 2016.

The British Council is the UK's international  
organisation for cultural relations, showcasing  
UK writing around the world and working with  
writers to draw people across the world into a  
closer relationship with the UK.

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

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

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

**Fleur Adcock:** 'Immigrant' from *Poems 1960-2000* (Bloodaxe 2000)

**Moniza Alvi:** 'Arrival 1946' from *Split World: Poems 1990-2005* (Bloodaxe 2008)

**Gerard Benson:** 'Riddle' from *A Good Time* (Smith/Doorstop 2010)

**James Berry:** 'Benediction' from *A Story I Am In: Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe 2011)

**Kamau Brathwaite:** 'Naima' from *Jah Music* © Kamau Brathwaite 1986

**Faustin Charles:** 'Viv' © Faustin Charles

**David Constantine:** 'Coltsfoot and Larches' from *Collected Poems* (Bloodaxe 2004)

**Carol Ann Duffy:** 'Prayer' from *Mean Time* (Anvil 1998)

**Robert Graves:** 'Love Without Hope' from *Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. Patrick Quinn (Carcanet 2000)

**Tony Harrison:** 'Loving the Rituals' from *Tony Harrison: Collected Poems* (Penguin 2007)

**Seamus Heaney:** 'The Railway Children' from *Station Island* (Faber 1984)

**Cicely Herbert:** 'Everything Changes' © Cicely Herbert 1989

**Philip Larkin:** 'The Trees' from *High Windows* (Faber 1974)

**Frances Leviston:** 'Industrial' from *Public Dream* (Picador 2007)

---

**Czeslaw Milosz:** 'And Yet the Books' translated by Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass, from *New and Collected Poems 1931-2001* (Penguin 2001) © Czeslaw Milosz Royalties Inc, 2001

**Adrian Mitchell:** 'Goodbye' from *Greatest Hits* (Bloodaxe 1991)

**Grace Nichols:** 'Like a Beacon' from *I Have Crossed an Ocean: Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe 2010)

**Kathleen Raine:** 'Dream' from *Selected Poems* (Golgonooza Press 1988)

**Iain Crichton Smith:** 'The Exiles' from *Collected Poems* (Carcanet 1994)

**Anne Stevenson:** 'Ragwort' from *Poems 1953-2005* (Bloodaxe 2005)

**William Carlos Williams:** 'This Is Just to Say' from *The Collected Poems 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (Carcanet 2004)

## Poems on the Underground: A New Edition

Edited by Gerard Benson, Judith Chernaik  
and Cicely Herbert

Over 250 poems displayed on the Tube since  
the programme was launched in 1986.

Out now in Penguin paperback

# Poems on the Underground

30 YEARS

*1986-2016*

30 POEMS

