

Five O'Clock Shadow

Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984)

This is the time of day when we in the Men's ward

Think "one more surge of the pain and I give up the fight."

When he who struggles for breath can struggle less strongly:

This is the time of day which is worse than night.

5 A haze of thunder hangs on the hospital rose-beds,
A doctors' foursome out of the links is played,
Safe in her sitting-room Sister is putting her feet up:
This is the time of day when we feel betrayed.

Below the windows, loads of loving relations
10 Rev in the car park, changing gear at the bend,
Making for home and a nice big tea and the telly:
"Well, we've done what we can. It can't be long till the end."

This is the time of day when the weight of bedclothes
Is harder to bear than a sharp incision of steel.

15 The endless anonymous croak of a cheap transistor
Intensifies the lonely terror I feel.

The Sound of Night

Maxine Kumin (b. 1925)

And now the dark come on, all full of chitter noise.

Birds huggermugger crowd the trees,
the air thick with their vesper cries,
and bats, snub seven-pointed kites,
5 skitter across the lake, swing out,
squeak, chirp, dip, and skim in skates
of air, and the fat frogs wake and prink
wide-lipped, noisy as ducks, drunk
on boozy black, gloating chink-chunk.

10 And now on the narrow beach we defend ourselves from dark.
The cooking done, we build our firework
bright and hot and less for outlook
than for magic, and lie in our blankets
while night nickers around us. Crickets
15 chorus hallelujahs; paws, quiet
and quick as raindrops, play on the stones
expertly soft, run past and are gone;
fish pulse in the lake; the frogs hoarsen.

Now every voice of the hour—the known, the supposed, the strange,
20 the mindless, the witted, the never seen--
sing, thrum, impinge, and rearrange
endlessly; and debarred from sleep we wait
for the birds, importantly silent,
for the crease of first eye-licking light,
25 By the lake, locked black away and tight,
we lie, day creatures, overhearing night.

Mosquito

John Updike (1932-2009)

On the fine wire of his whine he walked,
Unseen in the ominous bedroom dark.
A traitor to his camouflage, he talked
A thirsty blue streak distinct as a spark.

5 I was to him a fragrant lake of blood
From which he had to sip a drop or die,
A reservoir, a lavish field of food,
I lay awake, unconscious of my size.

We seemed fair-matched opponents. Soft he dropped
10 Down like an anchor on his thread of song.
His nose sank thankfully in; then I slapped
At the sting on my arm, cunning and strong.

A cunning and strong Gargantua, I struck
This lover pinned in the feast of my flesh
15 Lulled by my blood, relaxed, half-sated, stuck,
Engrossed in the gross rivers of myself.

Success! Without a cry the creature died,
Became a fleck of fluff upon the sheet.
The small welt of remorse subsides as side
20 By side we, murderer and murdered, sleep.

Question

May Swenson (1913-1989)

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

5 Where will I sleep
 How will I ride
 What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount

10 all eager and quick
 How will I know
 In thicket ahead
 is danger or treasure
 when Body my good

15 bright dog is dead

How will it be
to lie in the sky
without roof or door
and wind for an eye

20 With cloud for shift
 how will I hide?

Dolor

Theodore Roethke (1908-1963)

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils,
Neat in their boxes, dolor of pad and paper weight,
All the misery of manilla folders and mucilage,
Desolation in immaculate public places,
5 Lonely reception room, lavatory, switchboard,
The unalterable pathos of basin and pitcher,
Ritual of multigraph, paper-clip, comma,
Endless duplicaton of lives and objects.
And I have seen dust from the walls of institutions,
Finer than flour, alive, more dangerous than silica,
10 Sift, almost invisible, through long afternoons of tedium,
Dropping a fine film on nails and delicate eyebrows,
Glazing the pale hair, the duplicate grey standard faces.

Promises Like Pie-Crust

Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

Promise me no promises,

So will I not promise you;

Keep we both our liberties,

Never false and never true:

5 Let us hold the die uncast,

Free to come as free to go;

For I cannot know your past,

And of mine what can you know?

You, so warm, may once have been

10 Warmer towards another one;

I, so cold, may once have seen

Sunlight, once have felt the sun:

Who shall show us if it was

Thus indeed in time of old?

15 Fades the image from the glass

And the fortune is not told.

If you promised, you might grieve

For lost liberty again;

If I promised, I believe

20 I should fret to break the chain:

Let us be the friends we were,

Nothing more but nothing less;

Many thrive on frugal fare

Who would perish of excess.

Eve

Ralph Hodgson (1871-1962)

Eve, with her basket, was
Deep in the bells and grass,
Wading in bells and grass
Up to her knees.
5 Picking a dish of sweet
Berries and plums to eat,
Down in the bells and grass
Under the trees.

Mute as a mouse in a
10 Corner the cobra lay,
Curled round a bough of the
Cinnamon tall....
Now to get even and
Humble proud heaven and
15 Now was the moment or
Never at all.

"Eva!" Each syllable
Light as a flower fell,
"Eva!" he whispered the
20 Wondering maid,
Soft as a bubble sung
Out of a linnet's lung,
Soft and most silverly
"Eva!" he said.

25 Picture that orchard sprite;
Eve, with her body white,
Supple and smooth to her
Slim finger tips;
Wondering, listening,
30 Listening, wondering,
Eve with a berry
Half-way to her lips.

Oh, had our simple Eve
Seen through the make believe!
35 Had she but known the
Pretender he was!
Out of the boughs he came,
Whispering still her name,
Tumbling in twenty rings
40 Into the grass.

Here was the strangest pair
In the world anywhere,
Eve in the bells and grass
Kneeling, and he
45 Telling his story low....
Singing birds saw them go
Down the dark path to
The Blasphemous Tree.

Oh, what a clatter when
50 Titmouse and Jenny Wren
Saw him successful and
Taking his leave!
How the birds rated him,
How they all hated him!
55 How they all pitied
Poor motherless Eve!

Picture her crying
Outside in the lane,
Eve, with no dish of sweet
60 Berries and plums to eat,
Haunting the gate of the
Orchard in vain....
Picture the lewd delight
Under the hill to-night—
65 "Eva!" the toast goes round,
"Eva!" again.

Death, be not proud

John Donne (1572-1631)

Death, be not proud, though some have callèd thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;

For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow

Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

5 From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,

Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,

And soonest our best men with thee do go,

Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,

10 And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,

And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,

And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

To Death

Anne Finch (1661-1720)

O King of terrors, whose unbounded sway

All that have life must certainly obey;

The King, the Priest, the Prophet, all are thine,

Nor would ev'n God (in flesh) thy stroke decline.

5 My name is on thy roll, and sure I must

Increase thy gloomy kingdom in the dust.

My soul at this no apprehension feels,

But trembles at thy swords, thy racks, thy wheels;

Thy scorching fevers, which distract the sense,

10 And snatch us raving, unprepared, from hence;

At thy contagious darts, that wound the heads

Of weeping friends, who wait at dying beds.

Spare these, and let thy time be when it will;

My bus'ness is to die, and thine to kill.

15 Gently thy fatal scepter on me lay,

And take to thy cold arms, insensibly, thy prey.

The Story We Know

Martha Collins (b. 1940)

The way to begin is always the same. Hello,
Hello. Your hand, your name. So glad, just fine,
and Good bye at the end. That's every story we know,

and why pretend? But lunch tomorrow? No?

5 Yes? An omelette, salad, chilled white wine?

The way to begin is simple, sane, Hello,

and then it's Sunday, coffee, the Times, a slow
day by the fire, dinner at eight or nine
and Good bye. In the end, this is a story we know

10 so well we don't turn the page, or look below
the picture, or follow the words to the next line:
The way to begin is always the same Hello.

But one night, through the latticed window, snow
begins to whiten the air, and the tall white pine.

15 Good bye is the end of every story we know

that night, and when we dose the curtains, oh,
we hold each other against that cold white sign
of the way we all begin and end. Hello,
Good bye is the only story. We know, we know.

Sonnet 73

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

That time of year thou mayst in me behold

When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

5 In me thou seest the twilight of such day

As after sunset fadeth in the west,

Which by and by black night doth take away,

Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire

10 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

As the death-bed whereon it must expire

Consumed with that which it was nourished by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Well, I Have Lost You

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

Well, I have lost you; and I lost you fairly;

In my own way, and with my full consent.

Say what you will, kings in a tumbrel rarely

Went to their deaths more proud than this one went.

5 Some nights of apprehension and hot weeping

I will confess; but that's permitted me;

Day dried my eyes; I was not one for keeping

Rubbed in a cage a wing that would be free.

If I had loved you less or played you slyly

10 I might have held you for a summer more,

But at the cost of words I value highly,

And no such summer as the one before.

Should I outlive this anguish—and men do—

I shall have only good to say of you.

Auto Wreck

Karl Shapiro (1913-2000)

Its quick soft silver bell beating, beating,
And down the dark one ruby flare
Pulsing out red light like an artery,
The ambulance at top speed floating down
5 Past beacons and illuminated clocks
Wings in a heavy curve, dips down,
And brakes speed, entering the crowd.
The doors leap open, emptying light;
Stretchers are laid out, the mangled lifted
10 And stowed into the little hospital.
Then the bell, breaking the hush, tolls once,
And the ambulance with its terrible cargo
Rocking, slightly rocking, moves away,
As the doors, and afterthought, are closed.

15 We are deranged, walking among the cops
Who sweep glass and are large and composed.
One is still making notes under the light.
One with a bucket douches ponds of blood
Into the street and gutter.

20 One hangs lanterns on the wrecks that cling,
Empty husks of locusts, to iron poles.

Our throats were tight as tourniquets,
Our feet were bound with splints, but now,
Like convalescents intimate and gauche,
25 We speak through sickly smiles and warn
With the stubborn saw of common sense,
The grim joke and the banal resolution.
The traffic moves around with care,
But we remain, touching a wound
30 That opens to our richest horror.
Already old, the question Who shall die?
Becomes unspoken Who is innocent?

For death in war is done by hands;
Suicide has cause and stillbirth, logic;
35 And cancer, simple as a flower, blooms.

But this invites the occult mind,
Cancels our physics with a sneer,
And spatters all we knew of denouement
Across the expedient and wicked stones.

Spring and Fall

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

Márgarét, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves, líke the things of mán, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
5 Áh! Ás the heart grows ólder
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you *will* weep and know why.
10 Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórror's spríngs áre the sáme.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What héart héard of, ghóst guéssed:
It is the blíght mán was bórn for,
15 It is Margaret you mourn for.

The Oven Bird

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

There is a singer everyone has heard,
Loud, a mid-summer and a mid-wood bird,
Who makes the solid tree trunks sound again.
He says that leaves are old and that for flowers
5 Mid-summer is to spring as one to ten.
He says the early petal-fall is past
When pear and cherry bloom went down in showers
On sunny days a moment overcast;
And comes that other fall we name the fall.
10 He says the highway dust is over all.
The bird would cease and be as other birds
But that he knows in singing not to sing.
The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

Song

Edmund Waller (1606-1687)

Go lovely Rose,
Tell her that wastes her time and me,
That now she knows,
When I resemble her to thee,
5 How sweet and fair she seems to be.

Tell her that's young,
And shuns to have her graces spied,
That hadst thou sprung
In deserts where no men abide,
10 Thou must have uncommended died.

Small is the worth
Of beauty from the light retir'd:
Bid her come forth,
Suffer herself to be desired,
15 And not blush so to be admir'd.

Then die, that she
The common fate of all things rare
May read in thee,
How small a part of time they share
20 That are so wondrous sweet and fair.

Virtue

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal of the earth and sky,
The dew shall weep thy fall to night;
For thou must die.
5 Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie,
My music shows ye have your closes,
10 And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like season'd timber, never gives;
15 But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

Dear March—Come in—
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Dear March—Come in—
How glad I am—
I hoped for you before—
Put down your Hat—
5 You must have walked—
How out of Breath you are—
Dear March, how are you, and the Rest—
Did you leave Nature well—
Dear March, Come right up the stairs with me—
10 I have so much to tell—

I got your Letter, and the Birds—
The Maples never knew that you were coming—till I called
I declare—how Red their Faces grew—
But March, forgive me—and
15 All those Hills you left for me to Hue—
There was no Purple suitable—
You took it all with you—

Who knocks? That April.
Lock the Door—
20 I will not be pursued—
He stayed away a Year to call
When I am occupied—
But trifles look so trivial
As soon as you have come
25 That Blame is just as dear as Praise
And Praise as mere as Blame—

Apparently with no surprise
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

Apparently with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play—
In accidental power—
5 The blond Assassin passes on—
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day,
For an Approving God.