**Power and conflict poems**

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**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 shatter’d visage lies, whose frown

And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamp’d on these lifeless things,

The hand that mock’d 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

**London**

WILLIAM BLAKE

I wander thro' each charter'd street,

Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.

And mark in every face I meet

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,

In every Infants cry of fear,

In every voice: in every ban,

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry

Every blackning Church appalls,

And the hapless Soldiers sigh

Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear

How the youthful Harlots curse

Blasts the new-born Infants tear

And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse

**Extract from The Prelude**

One summer evening (led by her) I found

A little boat tied to a willow tree

Within a rocky cove, its usual home.

Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in

Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth

And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice

Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;

Leaving behind her still, on either side,

Small circles glittering idly in the moon,

Until they melted all into one track

Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,

Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point

With an unswerving line, I fixed my view

Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,

The horizon’s utmost boundary; far above

Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.

She was an elfin pinnace; lustily

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,

And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat

Went heaving through the water like a swan;

When, from behind that craggy steep till then

The horizon’s bound, a huge peak, black and huge,

As if with voluntary power instinct,

Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,

And growing still in stature the grim shape

Towered up between me and the stars, and still,

For so it seemed, with purpose of its own

And measured motion like a living thing,

Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,

And through the silent water stole my way

Back to the covert of the willow tree;

There in her mooring-place I left my bark, –

And through the meadows homeward went, in grave

And serious mood; but after I had seen

That spectacle, for many days, my brain

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense

Of unknown modes of being; o’er my thoughts

There hung a darkness, call it solitude

Or blank desertion. No familiar shapes

Remained, no pleasant images of trees,

Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;

But huge and mighty forms, that do not live

Like living men, moved slowly through the mind

By day, and were a trouble to my dreams.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

**My Last Duchess**

Ferrara

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said

‘Frà Pandolf’ by design, for never read

Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not

Her husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps

Frà Pandolf chanced to say ‘Her mantle laps

Over my lady’s wrist too much,’ or ‘Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat’: such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough

For calling up that spot of joy. She had

A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er

She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, ’twas all one! My favour at her breast,

The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace – all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men, – good! but thanked

Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will

Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this

Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark’ – and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,

– E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet

26

The company below, then. I repeat,

The Count your master’s known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretence

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed

At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go

Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,

Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,

Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

ROBERT BROWNING

**The Charge of the Light Brigade**

1.

Half a league, half a league,

Half a league onward,

All in the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

‘Forward, the Light Brigade!

Charge for the guns!’ he said:

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

2.

‘Forward, the Light Brigade!’

Was there a man dismay’d?

Not tho’ the soldier knew

Some one had blunder’d:

Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do and die:

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred.

3.

Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

Cannon in front of them

Volley’d and thunder’d;

Storm’d at with shot and shell,

Boldly they rode and well,

Into the jaws of Death,

Into the mouth of Hell

Rode the six hundred.

4.

Flash’d all their sabres bare,

Flash’d as they turn’d in air

Sabring the gunners there,

Charging an army, while

All the world wonder’d:

Plunged in the battery-smoke

Right thro’ the line they broke;

Cossack and Russian

Reel’d from the sabre-stroke

Shatter’d and sunder’d.

Then they rode back, but not

Not the six hundred.

5.

Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

28

Cannon behind them

Volley’d and thunder’d;

Storm’d at with shot and shell,

While horse and hero fell,

They that had fought so well

Came thro’ the jaws of Death

Back from the mouth of Hell,

All that was left of them

Left of six hundred.

6.

When can their glory fade?

O the wild charge they made!

All the world wonder’d.

Honour the charge they made!

Honour the Light Brigade,

Noble six hundred!

Alfred Lord Tennyson

**Exposure**

Wilfred Owen

I

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us ...

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent ...

Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient ...

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,

But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire.

Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.

Northward incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,

Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.

What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow ...

We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army

Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray,

But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.

Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause and renew,

We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,

But nothing happens.

II

Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling for our faces--

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,

Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,

Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.

Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires glozed

With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;

For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;

Shutters and doors all closed: on us the doors are closed--

We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;

Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.

For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;

Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,

For love of God seems dying.

To-night, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,

Shrivelling many hands and puckering foreheads crisp.

The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,

Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

But nothing happens.

**STORM ON THE ISLAND**

We are prepared: we build our houses squat,

Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.

This wizened earth has never troubled us

With hay, so, as you see, there are no stacks

Or stooks that can be lost. Nor are there trees

Which might prove company when it blows full

Blast: you know what I mean - leaves and branches

Can raise a tragic chorus in a gale

So that you listen to the thing you fear

Forgetting that it pummels your house too.

But there are no trees, no natural shelter.

You might think that the sea is company,

Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs

But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits

The very windows, spits like a tame cat

Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives

And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo,

We are bombarded with the empty air.

Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.

Seamus Heaney (1939 – 2013)

**Bayonet Charge** Ted Hughes (1930 – 1998)

Suddenly he awoke and was running - raw

In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,

Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge

That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing

Bullets smacking the belly out of the air -

He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;

The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye

Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, -

In bewilderment then he almost stopped -

In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations

Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running

Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs

Listening between his footfalls for the reason

Of his still running, and his foot hung like

Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed furrows

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame

And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide

Open silent, its eyes standing out.

He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,

King, honour, human dignity, etcetera

Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm

To get out of that blue crackling air

His terror’s touchy dynamite.

Remains

Simon Armitage

On another occasion, we get sent out

to tackle looters raiding a bank.

And one of them legs it up the road,

probably armed, possibly not.

Well myself and somebody else and somebody else

are all of the same mind,

so all three of us open fire.

Three of a kind all letting fly, and I swear

I see every round as it rips through his life –

I see broad daylight on the other side.

So we’ve hit this looter a dozen times

and he’s there on the ground, sort of inside out,

pain itself, the image of agony.

One of my mates goes by

and tosses his guts back into his body.

Then he’s carted off in the back of a lorry.

End of story, except not really.

His blood-shadow stays on the street, and out on patrol

I walk right over it week after week.

Then I’m home on leave. But I blink

and he bursts again through the doors of the bank.

Sleep, and he’s probably armed, possibly not.

Dream, and he’s torn apart by a dozen rounds.

And the drink and the drugs won’t flush him out –

he’s here in my head when I close my eyes,

dug in behind enemy lines,

not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned, sand-smothered land

or six-feet-under in desert sand,

but near to the knuckle, here and now,

his bloody life in my bloody hands.

**Poppies**

Jane Weir

Three days before Armistice Sunday

and poppies had already been placed

on individual war graves. Before you left,

I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,

spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade

of yellow bias binding around your blazer.

Sellotape bandaged around my hand,

I rounded up as many white cat hairs

as I could, smoothed down your shirt's

upturned collar, steeled the softening

of my face. I wanted to graze my nose

across the tip of your nose, play at

being Eskimos like we did when

you were little. I resisted the impulse

to run my fingers through the gelled

blackthorns of your hair. All my words

flattened, rolled, turned into felt,

slowly melting. I was brave, as I walked

with you, to the front door, threw

it open, the world overflowing

like a treasure chest. A split second

and you were away, intoxicated.

After you'd gone I went into your bedroom,

released a song bird from its cage.

Later a single dove flew from the pear tree,

and this is where it has led me,

skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy

making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without

a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves.

On reaching the top of the hill I traced

the inscriptions on the war memorial,

leaned against it like a wishbone.

The dove pulled freely against the sky,

an ornamental stitch, I listened, hoping to hear

your playground voice catching on the wind.

**War Photographer**

Carol Ann Duffy (1955 - )

In his dark room he is finally alone

with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.

The only light is red and softly glows,

as though this were a church and he

a priest preparing to intone a Mass.

Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays

beneath his hands, which did not tremble then

though seem to now. Rural England. Home again

to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,

to fields which don’t explode beneath the feet

of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger’s features

faintly start to twist before his eyes,

a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries

of this man’s wife, how he sought approval

without words to do what someone must

and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black and white

from which his editor will pick out five or six

for Sunday’s supplement. The reader’s eyeballs prick

with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.

From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where / he earns his living and they do not care.

**Tissue**

Imtiaz Dharker

Paper that lets the light

shine through, this

is what could alter things.

Paper thinned by age or touching,

the kind you find in well-used books,

the back of the Koran, where a hand

has written in the names and histories,

who was born to whom,

the height and weight, who

died where and how, on which sepia date,

pages smoothed and stroked and turned

transparent with attention.

If buildings were paper, I might

feel their drift, see how easily

they fall away on a sigh, a shift

in the direction of the wind.

Maps too. The sun shines through

their borderlines, the marks

that rivers make, roads,

railtracks, mountainfolds,

Fine slips from grocery shops

that say how much was sold

and what was paid by credit card

might fly our lives like paper kites.

An architect could use all this,

place layer over layer, luminous

script over numbers over line,

and never wish to build again with brick

or block, but let the daylight break

through capitals and monoliths,

through the shapes that pride can make,

find a way to trace a grand design

with living tissue, raise a structure

never meant to last,

of paper smoothed and stroked

and thinned to be transparent,

turned into your skin.

**Emigree**

Carol Rumens

There once was a country… I left it as a child

but my memory of it is sunlight-clear

for it seems I never saw it in that November

which, I am told, comes to the mildest city.

The worst news I receive of it cannot break

my original view, the bright, filled paperweight.

It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,

but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes

glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks

and the frontiers rise between us, close like waves.

That child’s vocabulary I carried here

like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar.

Soon I shall have every coloured molecule of it.

It may by now be a lie, banned by the state

but I can’t get it off my tongue. It tastes of sunlight.

I have no passport, there’s no way back at all

but my city comes to me in its own white plane.

It lies down in front of me, docile as paper;

I comb its hair and love its shining eyes.

My city takes me dancing through the city

of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.

They accuse me of being dark in their free city.

My city hides behind me. They mutter death,

and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight.

**Kamikaze**

Her father embarked at sunrise

with a flask of water, a samurai sword

in the cockpit, a shaven head

full of powerful incantations

and enough fuel for a one-way

journey into history

but half way there, she thought,

recounting it later to her children,

he must have looked far down

at the little fishing boats

strung out like bunting

on a green-blue translucent sea

and beneath them, arcing in swathes

like a huge flag waved first one way

then the other in a figure of eight,

the dark shoals of fishes

flashing silver as their bellies

swivelled towards the sun

and remembered how he

and his brothers waiting on the shore

built cairns of pearl-grey pebbles

to see whose withstood longest

the turbulent inrush of breakers

bringing their father’s boat safe

– yes, grandfather’s boat – safe

to the shore, salt-sodden, awash

with cloud-marked mackerel,

black crabs, feathery prawns,

the loose silver of whitebait and once

a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous.

And though he came back

my mother never spoke again

in his presence, nor did she meet his eyes

and the neighbours too, they treated him

as though he no longer existed,

only we children still chattered and laughed

till gradually we too learned

to be silent, to live as though

he had never returned, that this

was no longer the father we loved.

And sometimes, she said, he must have wondered

which had been the better way to die.

Beatrice Garland

**Checking Out Me History**

John Agard

Dem tell me

Dem tell me

Wha dem want to tell me

Bandage up me eye with me own history

Blind me to me own identity

Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat

Dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat

But Toussaint L’Ouverture

No dem never tell me bout dat

Toussaint

A slave

With vision

Lick back

Napoleon

Battalion

And first Black

Republic born

Toussaint de thorn

To de French

Toussaint de beacon

Of de Haitian Revolution

Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon

And de cow who jump over de moon

Dem tell me bout de dish ran away with de spoon

But dem never tell me bout Nanny de Maroon

Nanny

See-far woman

Of mountain dream

Fire-woman struggle

Hopeful stream

To freedom river

Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo

But dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu

Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492

But what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too

Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp

And how Robin Hood used to camp

Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul

But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

From Jamaica

She travel far

To the Crimean War

She volunteer to go

And even when de British said no

She still brave the Russian snow

A healing star

Among the wounded

A yellow sunrise

To the dying

Dem tell me

Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me

But now I checking out me own history

I carving out me identity