

Poems about

CHILDHOOD

The English Majors' Association Faculty/Student Poetry Event for Winter, 2018

A Hymn to Childhood

Li-Young Lee

Childhood? Which childhood?
The one that didn't last?
The one in which you learned to be afraid
of the boarded-up well in the backyard
and the ladder in the attic?

The one presided over by armed men
in ill-fitting uniforms
strolling the streets and alleys,
while loudspeakers declared a new era,
and the house around you grew bigger,
the rooms farther apart, with more and more
people missing?

The photographs whispered to each other
from their frames in the hallway.
The cooking pots said your name
each time you walked past the kitchen.

And you pretended to be dead with your sister
in games of rescue and abandonment.
You learned to lie still so long
the world seemed a play you viewed from the muffled
safety of a wing. Look! In
run the servants screaming, the soldiers shouting,
turning over the furniture,
smashing your mother's china.

Don't fall asleep.
Each act opens with your mother
reading a letter that makes her weep.
Each act closes with your father fallen
into the hands of Pharaoh.

Which childhood? The one that never ends? O you,
still a child, and slow to grow.
Still talking to God and thinking the snow
falling is the sound of God listening,

and winter is the high-ceilinged house
where God measures with one eye
an ocean wave in octaves and minutes,
and counts on many fingers
all the ways a child learns to say Me.

Which childhood?
The one from which you'll never escape? You,
so slow to know
what you know and don't know.
Still thinking you hear low song
in the wind in the eaves,
story in your breathing,
grief in the heard dove at evening,
and plentitude in the unseen bird
tolling at morning. Still slow to tell
memory from imagination, heaven
from here and now,
hell from here and now,
death from childhood, and both of them
from dreaming.

Yet another poem about a dying child

Janet Frame

Poets and parents say he cannot die
so young, so tied to trees and stars.
Their word across his mouth obscures
and cures his murmuring good-bye.
He babbles, they say, of spring flowers,

Who for six months has lain
his flesh at a touch bruised violet,
his face pale, his hate clearer
than milky love that would smooth over
the pebbles of diseased bone.

Pain spangles him like the sun,
He cries and cannot say why.
His blood blossoms like a pear tree.
He does not want to eat or keep

its ugly windfall fruit.

He does not want to spend or share
the engraved penny of light
that birth put in his hand
telling him to hold on tight.
Will parents and poets not understand?

He must sleep, rocking the web of pain
till the kind furred spider will come
with the night-lamp eyes and soft tread
to wrap him warm and carry him home
to a dark place, and eat him.

Those Winter Sundays

Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Childhood

Kathleen Raine

I see all, am all, all.
I leap along the line of the horizon hill,
I am cloud in the high sky,
I trace the veins of intricate fern.
In the dark ivy wall the wren's world
Soft to bird-breast nest of round eggs is mine,
Mine in the rowan-tree the blackbird's thought
Inviolable in leaves ensphered.
I am bird-world, leaf-life, I am wasp-world hung
Under low berry branch of hidden thorn,

Moss-thought, rain-thought, stone still thought on the hill.

Never, never, never will I go home to be a child.

the mother

Gwendolyn Brooks

Abortions will not let you forget.
You remember the children you got that you did not get,
The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair,
The singers and workers that never handled the air.
You will never neglect or beat
Them, or silence or buy with a sweet.
You will never wind up the sucking-thumb
Or scuttle off ghosts that come.
You will never leave them, controlling your luscious sigh,
Return for a snack of them, with gobbling mother-eye.

I have heard in the voices of the wind the voices of my
dim killed children.
I have contracted. I have eased
My dim dears at the breasts they could never suck.
I have said, Sweets, if I sinned, if I seized
Your luck
And your lives from your unfinished reach,
If I stole your births and your names,
Your straight baby tears and your games,
Your stilted or lovely loves, your tumults, your marriages,
aches, and your deaths,
If I poisoned the beginnings of your breaths,
Believe that even in my deliberateness I was not
deliberate.
Though why should I whine,
Whine that the crime was other than mine?—
Since anyhow you are dead.
Or rather, or instead,
You were never made.
But that too, I am afraid,
Is faulty: oh, what shall I say, how is the truth to be said?
You were born, you had body, you died.
It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.

Believe me, I loved you all.
Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I
loved you
All.

From "Intimations Ode"

William Wordsworth

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon him from his father's eyes!
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,
Some fragment from his dream of human life,
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art
A wedding or a festival,
A mourning or a funeral;
And this hath now his heart,
And unto this he frames his song:
Then will he fit his tongue
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;
But it will not be long
Ere this be thrown aside,
And with new joy and pride
The little Actor cons another part;
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
That Life brings with her in her equipage;
As if his whole vocation
Were endless imitation.

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul's immensity;
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,—
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;
Thou, over whom thy Immortality
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,
A Presence which is not to be put by;
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,

Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

Frost at Midnight

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

The Frost performs its secret ministry,
Unhelped by any wind. The owl's cry
Came loud—and hark, again! loud as before.
The inmates of my cottage, all at rest,
Have left me to that solitude, which suits
Abstruser musings: save that at my side
My cradled infant slumbers peacefully.
'Tis calm indeed! so calm, that it disturbs
And vexes meditation with its strange
And extreme silentness. Sea, hill, and wood,
This populous village! Sea, and hill, and wood,
With all the numberless goings-on of life,
Inaudible as dreams! the thin blue flame
Lies on my low-burnt fire, and quivers not;
Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,

Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,
Making it a companionable form,
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit
By its own moods interprets, every where
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,
And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,
To watch that fluttering stranger! and as oft
With unclosed lids, already had I dreamt
Of my sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang
From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,
So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds of things to come!
So gazed I, till the soothing things, I dreamt,
Lulled me to sleep, and sleep prolonged my dreams!
And so I brooded all the following morn,
Awed by the stern preceptor's face, mine eye
Fixed with mock study on my swimming book:
Save if the door half opened, and I snatched

A hasty glance, and still my heart leaped up,
For still I hoped to see the stranger's face,
Townsmen, or aunt, or sister more beloved,
My play-mate when we both were clothed alike!

Dear Babe, that sleepest cradled by my side,
Whose gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm,
Fill up the intersperséd vacancies
And momentary pauses of the thought!
My babe so beautiful! it thrills my heart
With tender gladness, thus to look at thee,
And think that thou shalt learn far other lore,
And in far other scenes! For I was reared
In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim,
And saw nought lovely but the sky and stars.
But thou, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
Of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask.

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the night-thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet Moon.

**To a Little Invisible Being Who is Expected Soon to
Become Visible**

Anna Lætitia Barbauld

Germ of new life, whose powers expanding slow
For many a moon their full perfection wait,—
Haste, precious pledge of happy love, to go
Auspicious borne through life's mysterious gate.

What powers lie folded in thy curious frame,—
Senses from objects locked, and mind from thought!
How little canst thou guess thy lofty claim
To grasp at all the worlds the Almighty wrought!

And see, the genial season's warmth to share,
Fresh younglings shoot, and opening roses glow!
Swarms of new life exulting fill the air,—
Haste, infant bud of being, haste to blow!

For thee the nurse prepares her lulling songs,
The eager matrons count the lingering day;
But far the most thy anxious parent longs
On thy soft cheek a mother's kiss to lay.

She only asks to lay her burden down,
That her glad arms that burden may resume;
And nature's sharpest pangs her wishes crown,
That free thee living from thy living tomb.

She longs to fold to her maternal breast
Part of herself, yet to herself unknown;
To see and to salute the stranger guest,
Fed with her life through many a tedious moon.

Come, reap thy rich inheritance of love!
Bask in the fondness of a Mother's eye!
Nor wit nor eloquence her heart shall move
Like the first accents of thy feeble cry.

Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!
Launch on the living world, and spring to light!
Nature for thee displays her various stores,
Opens her thousand inlets of delight.

If charmed verse or muttered prayers had power,
With favouring spells to speed thee on thy way,
Anxious I'd bid my beads each passing hour,
Till thy wished smile thy mother's pangs o'erpay.

Infant Sorrow

William Blake

My mother groand! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud;
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my fathers hands:
Striving against my swaddling bands:
Bound and weary I thought best
To sulk upon my mothers breast.

Infant Joy

William Blake

I have no name
I am but two days old.—
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name,—
Sweet joy befall thee!

Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old,
Sweet joy I call thee;
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while
Sweet joy befall thee.

Mira, as thy dear Edward's senses grow

Ann Yearsley

Mira, as thy dear Edward's senses grow,
Be sure they all will seek this point — to know :
Woo to enquiry — strictures long avoid;
By force the thirst of weakly sense is cloyed:
Silent attend the frown, the gaze, the smile,
To grasp far objects the incessant toil;
So play life's springs with energy, and try
The unceasing thirst of knowledge to supply.
I saw the beauteous Caleb t' other day
Stretch forth his little hand to touch a spray,
Whilst on the grass his drowsy nurse inhaled
The sweets of Nature as her sweets exhaled:
But, ere the infant reached the playful leaf,
She pulled him back — His eyes o'erflowed with grief;

He checked his tears — Her fiercer passions strove,
She looked a vulture cowering o'er a dove!
" I'll teach you, brat!" The pretty trembler sighed —
When, with a cruel shake, she hoarsely cried —
" Your mother spoils you — every thing you see
You covet. It shall ne'er be so with me!

Here, eat this cake, sit still, and don't you rise —
Why don't you pluck the sun down from the skies?
I'll spoil your sport — Come, laugh me in the face —
And henceforth learn to keep your proper place.
You rule me in the house! — To hush your noise
I, like a spaniel, must run for toys:
But here, Sir, let the trees alone, nor cry —
Pluck if you dare — Who's master? you, or I?"
O brutal force, to check th' enquiring mind,
When it would pleasure in a rosebud find!

Written for my Son, and Spoken by Him at his First Putting on Breeches

Mary Barber

WHAT is it our mamma's bewitches,
To plague us little boys with breeches ?
To tyrant Custom we must yield,
Whilst vanquish'd Reason flies the field.
Our legs must suffer by ligation,
To keep the blood from circulation ;
And then our feet, tho' young and tender,
We to the shoemaker's surrender ;
Who often makes our shoes so strait,
Our growing feet they cramp and fret ;
Whilst, with contrivance most profound,
Across our insteps we are bound ;
Which is the cause, I make no doubt,
Why thousands suffer in the gout.
Our wiser ancestors wore brogues,
Before the surgeons brib'd these rogues,
With narrow toes, and heels like pegs,
To help to make us break our legs.

Then, ere we know to use our fists,
Our mothers closely bind our wrists ;
And never think our cloaths are neat,
Till they're so tight we cannot eat.
And, to increase our other pains,
The hatband helps to cramp our brains.
The cravat finishes the work,
Like bowstring sent from the Grand Turk.

Thus dress, that should prolong our date,
Is made to hasten on our fate.
Fair privilege of nobler natures,
To be more plagu'd than other creatures !

The wild inhabitants of air
Are cloath'd by heav'n with wondrous care :
Their beauteous, well-compacted feathers
Are coats of mail against all weathers ;
Enamell'd, to delight the eye ;
Gay as the bow that decks the sky.
The beasts are cloath'd with beauteous skins:
The fishes arm'd with scales and fins ;
Whose lustre lends the sailor light,
When all the stars are hid in night.

O were our dress contriv'd like these,
For use, for ornament, and ease !
Man only seems to sorrow born,
Naked, defenceless, and forlorn.

Yet we have Reason to supply
What nature did to man deny :
Weak Viceroy ! Who thy pow'r will own,
When Custom has usurp'd thy throne?
In vain did I appeal to thee,
Ere I would wear his livery ;
Who, in defiance of thy rules,
Delights to make us act like fools.
O'er human race the tyrant reigns,
And binds them in eternal chains.
We yield to his despotic sway,
The only monarch all obey.

On My First Daughter

By Ben Jonson

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,
Mary, the daughter of their youth;
Yet all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,
It makes the father less to rue.
At six months' end she parted hence
With safety of her innocence;
Whose soul heaven's queen, whose name she bears,
In comfort of her mother's tears,
Hath placed amongst her virgin-train:
Where, while that severed doth remain,
This grave partakes the fleshly birth;
Which cover lightly, gentle earth!

On my First Son

Ben Jonson

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
Seven years tho' wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,
And if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

From "The Monk's Tale" (519-574)

Geoffrey Chaucer

Off the erl hugelyn of pyze the langour
Ther may no tonge telle for pitee.
But litel out of pize stant a tour,
In which tour in prisoun put was he,
And with hym been his litel children thre;
The eldest scarsly fyf yeer was of age.
Allas, fortune! it was greet crueltee
Swiche briddes for to putte in swich a cage!

Dampned was he to dyen in that prisoun,
For roger, which that bisshop was of pize,
Hadde on hym maad a fals suggestioun,
Thurgh which the peple gan upon hym rise,
And putten hym to prisoun, in swich wise
As ye han herd, and mete and drynke he hadde
So smal, that wel unnethe it may suffice,
And therwithal it was ful povre and badde.

And on a day bifil that in that hour
Whan that his mete wont was to be broght,
The gayler shette the dores of the tour.
He herde it wel, but he spak right noght,
And in his herte anon ther fil a thoght
That they for hunger wolde doon hym dyen.
Allas! quod he, alas, that I was wroght!
Therwith the teeris fillen from his yen.

His yonge sone, that thre yeer was of age,
Unto hym seyde, fader, why do ye wepe?
Whanne wol the gayler bryngen oure potage?

Is ther no morsel breed that ye do kepe?
I am so hungry that I may nat slepe.
Now wolde God that I myghte slepen evere!
Thanne sholde nat hunger in my wombe crepe;
Ther is no thyng, save breed, that me were levere.

Thus day by day this child bigan to crye,
Til in his fadres barm adoun it lay,
And seyde, farewell, fader, I moot dye!
And kiste his fader, and dyde the same day.
And whan the woful fader deed it say,
For wo his armes two he gan to byte,
And seyde, alas, fortune, and weylaway!
Thy false wheel my wo al may I wyte.

His children wende that it for hunger was
That he his armes gnaw, and nat for wo,
And seyde, fader, do nat so, alas!
But rather ete the flessch upon us two.
Oure flessch thou yaf us, take oure flessch us fro,
And ete ynogh, -- right thus they to hym seyde,
And after that, withinne a day or two,
They leyde hem in his lappe adoun and deyde.

Hymself, despeired, eek for hunger starf;
Thus ended is this myghty erl of pize.
From heigh estaat fortune away hym carf.
Of this tragedie it oghte ynough suffise;
Whoso wol here it in a lenger wise,
Redeth the grete poete of ytaille
That highte dant, for he kan al devyse
Fro point to point, nat o word wol he faille.