

What We Talk About When We Talk About The Weather: Poems for an El Niño Year

From King Lear

By William Shakespeare

*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
Smite flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
Crack nature's moulds, an germens spill at once,
That make ingrateful man!*

“Wynter wakeneth al my care”

Anonymous C14th lyric.

Wynter wakeneth all my care,
Now this lewes waxeth bare;
Ofte I sike and mourne sare
When it cometh in my thought
Of this worldes joye,
How it geth all to nought.

Now it is and now it nis,
Also it ner nere iwis;
That mony mon seith, soth it is:
All goth bote Godes wille:
Alle we shule deye
Thagh us like ille.

All that grein me graveth grene,
Now it faleweth all bidene;
Jesu, help that it be sene,
And shild us from helle,
For I not whider I shall
Ne how longe her dwelle.

Winter awakens all my sorrow,
Now the leaves grow barren.
Often I sigh and sadly mourn
When it enters into my thought
Of this world's joy,
How it all goes to nought.

Now it is and now it isn't,
As if it had never been, indeed.
What many a man says, it is true:
All passes but God's will.
We all shall die,
Though we dislike it.

All the grain men bury unripe,
Now it withers all at once.
Jesu, help this to be known,
And shield us from hell,
For I know not whither I'll go
Nor how long here dwell.

A Description of a City Shower

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

Careful observers may foretell the hour
(By sure prognostics) when to dread a shower:
While rain depends, the pensive cat gives o'er
Her frolics, and pursues her tail no more.
Returning home at night, you'll find the sink 5
Strike your offended sense with double stink.
If you be wise, then go not far to dine;
You'll spend in coach hire more than save in wine.
A coming shower your shooting corns presage,
Old achès throb, your hollow tooth will rage. 10
Sauntering in coffeehouse is Dulman seen;
He damns the climate and complains of spleen.
 Meanwhile the South, rising with dabbled wings,
A sable cloud athwart the welkin flings,
That swilled more liquor than it could contain, 15
And, like a drunkard, gives it up again.
Brisk Susan whips her linen from the rope,
While the first drizzling shower is born aslope:
Such is that sprinkling which some careless quean
Flirts on you from her mop, but not so clean: 20
You fly, invoke the gods; then turning, stop
To rail; she singing, still whirls on her mop.
Not yet the dust had shunned the unequal strife,
But, aided by the wind, fought still for life,
And wafted with its foe by violent gust, 25
'Twas doubtful which was rain and which was dust.
Ah! where must needy poet seek for aid,
When dust and rain at once his coat invade?
Sole coat, where dust cemented by the rain
Erects the nap, and leaves a mingled stain. 30
 Now in contiguous drops the flood comes down,
Threatening with deluge this devoted town.
To shops in crowds the daggled females fly,
Pretend to cheapen goods, but nothing buy.
The Templar spruce, while every spout's abroad, 35
Stays till 'tis fair, yet seems to call a coach.
The tucked-up sempstress walks with hasty strides,
While seams run down her oiled umbrella's sides.
Here various kinds, by various fortunes led,
Commence acquaintance underneath a shed. 40
Triumphant Tories and desponding Whigs
Forget their feuds, and join to save their wigs.
Boxed in a chair the beau impatient sits,

depends: impends or threatens

sink: sewer

Dulman: generic bore (a "dull man")

spleen: melancholy or depression

the South: South Wind *dabbled*: spattered

sable: dark *welkin*: sky

Susan: generic name for maid

aslope: slanting

quean: impudent woman

Flirts: flicks

Erects the nap: roughens the coat's fabric

devoted: doomed

daggled: bespattered

cheapen: bargain over

Templar spruce: dandified law-student

Tories/Whigs: major political factions

chair: sedan chair *beau*: fop, dandy

While spouts run clattering o'er the roof by fits,
And ever and anon with frightful din 45
The leather sounds; he trembles from within.
So when Troy chairmen bore the wooden steed,
Pregnant with Greeks impatient to be freed
(Those bully Greeks, who, as the moderns do,
Instead of paying chairmen, run them through), 50
Laocoön struck the outside with his spear,
And each imprisoned hero quaked for fear.

Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow, *kennels: gutters*
And bear their trophies with them as they go:
Filth of all hues and odors seem to tell 55
What street they sailed from, by their sight and smell.
They, as each torrent drives with rapid force,
From Smithfield or St. Pulchre's shape their course,
And in huge confluence joined at Snow Hill ridge,
Fall from the conduit prone to Holborn Bridge. 60 *prone: downwards*
Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud, *sprats: herring*
Dead cats, and turnip tops, come tumbling down the flood.

NB: The epic simile comparing the foppish "beau" to the Greek soldiers inside the giant wooden horse at Troy is referring to an incident in Book II of Virgil's *Aeneid*, when the priest Laocoon warns the Trojan's against accepting the Greek's gift (which is where our expression "beware of Greeks bearing gifts" comes from). To add emphasis to his remarks, he hurls his spear into the side of the horse, frightening the soldiers hidden inside. Unluckily for the Trojans, they don't follow Laocoon's advice.

From *Childe Harold Canto III*

By George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)

XCII

Thy sky is changed!—and such a change! Oh night,
And storm, and darkness, ye are wondrous strong,
Yet lovely in your strength, as is the light
Of a dark eye in woman! Far along,
From peak to peak, the rattling crags among
Leaps the live thunder! Not from one lone cloud,
But every mountain now hath found a tongue,
And Jura answers, through her misty shroud,
Back to the joyous Alps, who call to her aloud!

XCIII

And this is in the night: Most glorious night!
Thou wert not sent for slumber! let me be 870
A sharer in thy fierce and far delight, —
A portion of the tempest and of thee!
How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,
And the big rain comes dancing to the earth!
And now again 'tis black,—and now, the glee
Of the loud hills shakes with its mountain-mirth,
As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquake's birth.

XCIV

Now, where the swift Rhone cleaves his way between
Heights which appear as lovers who have parted
In hate, whose mining depths so intervene, 880
That they can meet no more, though broken-hearted;
Though in their souls, which thus each other thwarted,
Love was the very root of the fond rage
Which blighted their life's bloom and then departed:
Itself expired, but leaving them an age
Of years all winters,—war within themselves to wage.

XCV

Now, where the quick Rhone thus hath cleft his way,
The mightiest of the storms hath ta'en his stand:
For here, not one, but many, make their play,
And fling their thunder-bolts from hand to hand, 890
Flashing and cast around: of all the band,
The brightest through these parted hills hath fork'd
His lightnings,—as if he did understand,
That in such gaps as desolation work'd,
There the hot shaft should blast whatever therein lurk'd.

XCVI

Sky, mountain, river, winds, lake, lightnings! ye!
With night, and clouds, and thunder, and a soul
To make these felt and feeling, well may be
Things that have made me watchful; the far roll
Of your departing voices, is the knoll 900
Of what in me is sleepless,—if I rest.
But where of ye, oh tempests! is the goal?
Are ye like those within the human breast?
Or do ye find, at length, like eagles, some high nest?

XCVII

Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me,—could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into one word, 910
And that one word were Lightning, I would speak;
But as it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.

It sifts from Leaden Sieves

By Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

It sifts from Leaden Sieves—
It powders all the Wood.
It fills with Alabaster Wool
The Wrinkles of the Road—

It makes an even Face 5
Of Mountain, and of Plain—
Unbroken Forehead from the East
Unto the East again—

It reaches to the Fence—
It wraps it Rail by Rail 10
Till it is lost in Fleeces—
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack—and Stem—
A Summer's empty Room—
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were, 15
Recordless, but for them—

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts
As Ankles of a Queen—
Then stills its Artisans—like Ghosts—
Denying they have been— 20

Rain

Edward Thomas (1878-1917)

Rain, midnight rain, nothing but the wild rain
On this bleak hut, and solitude, and me
Remembering again that I shall die
And neither hear the rain nor give it thanks
For washing me cleaner than I have been 5
Since I was born into solitude.
Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain, 10
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead,
Like a cold water among broken reeds,
Myriads of broken reeds all still and stiff,
Like me who have no love which this wild rain 15
Has not dissolved except the love of death,
If love it be towards what is perfect and
Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.

7 January, 1916

The Snow Man

By Wallace Stevens (1979-1955)

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice, 5
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land 10
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. 15

Wild Iron

By Allen Curnow (1911-2001)

Sea go dark, go dark with wind,
Feet go heavy, heavy with sand,
Thoughts go wild, wild with the sound
Of iron on the old shed swinging, clanging:
Go dark, go heavy, go wild, go round,
 Dark with the wind
 Heavy with the sand,
Wild with the iron that tears at the nail
And the foundering shriek of the gale.

Cynthia in the Snow

By Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

It SUSHES.

It hushes

The loudness in the road.

It flutter-twitters,

And laughs away from me.

5

It laughs a lovely whiteness,

And whitely whirs away,

To be

Some elsewhere,

Still white as milk or shirts.

10

So beautiful it hurts.

Rain

By Hone Tuwhare (1922-2008)

I can hear you
making small holes
in the silence
rain

If I were deaf
the pores of my skin
would open to you
and shut

And I
should know you
by the lick of you
if I were blind

the something
special smell of you
when the sun cakes
the ground

the steady
drum-roll sound
you make
when the wind drops

But if I
should not hear
smell or feel or see
you

you would still
define me
disperse me
wash over me
rain