

The Poetry of Protest

*For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.*
W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

*Remember the war against Franco
That's the kind where each of us belongs
Though he may have won all the battles
We had all the good songs.*
Tom Lehrer, "The Folk Song Army"

Go Down Moses

Anonymous C19th Spiritual

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.

Refrain:

Go down, (go down) Moses, (Moses)
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To Let my people go!

"Thus saith the Lord," bold Moses said,
Let my people go;
"If not, I'll smite your first-born dead,"
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let my people go;
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

We need not always weep and mourn,
Let my people go;
And wear those slavery chains forlorn,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

Come, Moses, you will not get lost,
Let my people go;
Stretch out your rod and come across,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

As Israel stood by the water's side,
Let my people go;
At God's command it did divide,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

When they had reached the other shore,
Let my people go;
They sang a song of triumph o'er,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

O Moses, the cloud shall cleave the way,
Let my people go;
A fire by night, a shade by day,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

Your foes shall not before you stand,
Let my people go;
And you'll possess fair Canaan's land,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

This world's a wilderness of woe,
Let my people go;
O let us on to Canaan go,
Let my people go.
(Refrain)

O let us all from bondage flee,
Let my people go;
And let us all in Christ be free,
Let my people go.

When Adam Delved

Anonymous, C14th

When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?

A Curse for a Nation

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1856

I heard an angel speak last night,
And he said 'Write!
Write a Nation's curse for me,
And send it over the Western Sea.'

I faltered, taking up the word:
'Not so, my lord!
If curses must be, choose another
To send thy curse against my brother.'

'For I am bound by gratitude,
By love and blood,
To brothers of mine across the sea,
Who stretch out kindly hands to me.'

'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write
My curse to-night.
From the summits of love a curse is driven,
As lightning is from the tops of heaven.'

'Not so,' I answered. 'Evermore
My heart is sore
For my own land's sins: for little feet
Of children bleeding along the street:

'For parked-up honors that gainsay
The right of way:
For almsgiving through a door that is
Not open enough for two friends to kiss:

'For love of freedom which abates
Beyond the Straits:
For patriot virtue starved to vice on
Self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion:

'For an oligarchic parliament,
And bribes well-meant.
What curse to another land assign,
When heavy-souled for the sins of mine?'

'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write
My curse to-night.
Because thou hast strength to see and hate

A foul thing done within thy gate.'

'Not so,' I answered once again.
'To curse, choose men.
For I, a woman, have only known
How the heart melts and the tears run down.'

'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write
My curse to-night.
Some women weep and curse, I say
(And no one marvels), night and day.

'And thou shalt take their part to-night,
Weep and write.
A curse from the depths of womanhood
Is very salt, and bitter, and good.'

So thus I wrote, and mourned indeed,
What all may read.
And thus, as was enjoined on me,
I send it over the Western Sea.

The Curse

Because ye have broken your own chain
With the strain
Of brave men climbing a Nation's height,
Yet thence bear down with brand and thong
On souls of others, -- for this wrong
This is the curse. Write.

Because yourselves are standing straight
In the state
Of Freedom's foremost acolyte,
Yet keep calm footing all the time
On writhing bond-slaves, -- for this crime
This is the curse. Write.

Because ye prosper in God's name,
With a claim
To honor in the old world's sight,
Yet do the fiend's work perfectly

In strangling martyrs, -- for this lie
This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while kings conspire
Round the people's smouldering fire,
And, warm for your part,
Shall never dare -- O shame!
To utter the thought into flame
Which burns at your heart.
This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while nations strive
With the bloodhounds, die or survive,
Drop faint from their jaws,
Or throttle them backward to death;
And only under your breath
Shall favor the cause.
This is the curse. Write.

Ye shall watch while strong men draw
The nets of feudal law
To strangle the weak;
And, counting the sin for a sin,
Your soul shall be sadder within
Than the word ye shall speak.
This is the curse. Write.

When good men are praying erect
That Christ may avenge His elect

And deliver the earth,
The prayer in your ears, said low,
Shall sound like the tramp of a foe
That's driving you forth.
This is the curse. Write.

When wise men give you their praise,
They shall praise in the heat of the phrase,
As if carried too far.
When ye boast your own charters kept true,
Ye shall blush; for the thing which ye do
Derides what ye are.
This is the curse. Write.

When fools cast taunts at your gate,
Your scorn ye shall somewhat abate
As ye look o'er the wall;
For your conscience, tradition, and name
Explode with a deadlier blame
Than the worst of them all.
This is the curse. Write.

Go, wherever ill deeds shall be done,
Go, plant your flag in the sun
Beside the ill-doers!
And recoil from clenching the curse
Of God's witnessing Universe
With a curse of yours.
This is the curse. Write.

Song for Equal Suffrage

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1911

Day of hope and day of glory! After slavery and woe,
Comes the dawn of woman's freedom, and the light shall grow and grow
Until every man and woman equal liberty shall know,
 In Freedom marching on!

Woman's right is woman's duty! For our share in life we call!
Our will it is not weakened and our power it is not small.
We are half of every nation! We are mothers of them all!
 In Wisdom marching on!

Not for self but larger service has our cry for freedom grown,
There is crime, disease and warfare in a world of men alone,
In the name of love we're rising now to serve and save our own,
 As Peace comes marching on!

By every sweet and tender tie around our heartstrings curled,
In the cause of nobler motherhood is woman's flag unfurled,
Till every child shall know the joy and peace of mother's world—
 As Love comes marching on!

We will help to make a pruning hook of every outgrown sword,
We will help to knit the nations in continuing accord,
In humanity made perfect is the glory of the Lord,
 As His world goes marching on!

Let America Be America Again

Langston Hughes, 1936

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—

Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's,
Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.

From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,

And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

England in 1819

P. B. Shelley, 1819

An old, mad, blind, despis'd, and dying king,
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn—mud from a muddy spring,
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow,
A people starv'd and stabb'd in the untill'd field,
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edg'd sword to all who wield,
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay,
Religion Christless, Godless—a book seal'd,
A Senate—Time's worst statute unrepeal'd,
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

In Two Seconds

Mark Doty, 2015

Tamir Rice, 2002 - 2014

the boy's face
climbed back down the twelve-year tunnel

of its becoming, a charcoal sunflower
swallowing itself. Who has eyes to see,

or ears to hear? If you could see
what happens fastest, unmaking

the human irreplaceable, a star
falling into complete gravitational

darkness from all points of itself, all this:

the held loved body into which entered
milk and music, honeying the cells of him:

who sang to him, stroked the nap
of the scalp, kissed the flesh-knot

after the cord completed its work
of fueling into him the long history

of those whose suffering
was made more bearable

by the as-yet-unknown of him,

playing alone in some unthinkable
future city, a Cleveland,

whatever that might be.
Two seconds. To elapse:

the arc of joy in the conception bed,
the labor of hands repeated until

the hands no longer required attention,
so that as the woman folded

her hopes for him sank into the fabric

of his shirts and underpants. Down

they go, swirling down into the maw
of a greater dark. Treasure box,

comic books, pocket knife, bell from a lost cat's collar,
why even begin to enumerate them

when behind every tributary
poured into him comes rushing backward

all he hasn't been yet. Everything
that boy could have thought or made,

sung or theorized, built on the quavering
but continuous structure

that had preceded him sank into
an absence in the shape of a boy

playing with a plastic gun in a city park
in Ohio, in the middle of the afternoon.

When I say two seconds, I don't mean the time
it took him to die. I mean the lapse between

the instant the cruiser braked to a halt
on the grass, between that moment

and the one in which the officer fired his weapon.
The two seconds taken to assess the situation.

I believe it is part of the work
of poetry to try on at least

the moment and skin of another,

for this hour I respectfully decline.

I refuse it. May that officer
be visited every night of his life

by an enormity collapsing in front of him

into an incomprehensible bloom,
and the voice that howls out of it.

If this is no poem then...

But that voice — erased boy,
beloved of time, who did nothing
to no one and became

nothing because of it — I know that voice
is one of the things we call poetry.
It isn't only to his killer he's speaking.

No Ordinary Sun

Hone Tuwhare, 1964

Tree let your arms fall:
raise them not sharply in supplication
to the bright enhaloed cloud.
Let your arms lack toughness and
resilience for this is no mere axe
to blunt, nor fire to smother.

Your sap shall not rise again
to the moon's pull.
No more incline a deferential head
to the wind's talk, or stir
to the tickle of coursing rain.

Your former shagginess shall not be
wreathed with the delightful flight
of birds nor shield
nor cool the ardour of unheeding
lovers from the monstrous sun.

Tree let your naked arms fall
nor extend vain entreaties to the radiant ball.
This is no gallant monsoon's flash,
no dashing trade wind's blast.
The fading green of your magic
emanations shall not make pure again
these polluted skies . . . for this
is no ordinary sun.

O tree
in the shadowless mountains
the white plains and
the drab sea floor
your end at last is written.

Good People

W. S. Merwin, 1999

From the kindness of my parents
I suppose it was that I held
that belief about suffering

imagining that if only
it could come to the attention
of any person with normal
feelings certainly anyone
literate who might have gone

to college they would comprehend
pain when it went on before them
and would do something about it
whenever they saw it happen
in the time of pain the present
they would try to stop the bleeding
for example with their own hands

but it escapes their attention
or there may be reasons for it
the victims under the blankets
the meat counters the maimed children
the animals the animals
staring from the end of the world

Tenebrae

Denise Levertov (Fall '67)

Heavy, heavy, heavy, hand and heart.
We are at war,
bitterly, bitterly at war.

And the buying and selling
buzzes at our heads, a swarm
of busy flies, a kind of innocence.

Gowns of gold sequins are fitted,
sharp-glinting. What harsh rustlings
of silver moiré there are,
to remind me of shrapnel splinters.

And weddings are held in full solemnity
not of desire but of etiquette,
the nuptial pomp of starched lace;
a grim innocence.

And picnic parties return from the beaches
burning with stored sun in the dusk;
children promised a TV show when they get home
fall asleep in the backs of a million station wagons,
sand in their hair, the sound of waves
quietly persistent at their ears.
They are not listening.

Their parents at night
dream and forget their dreams.
They wake in the dark
and make plans. Their sequin plans
glitter into tomorrow.
They buy, they sell.

They fill freezers with food.
Neon signs flash their intentions
into the years ahead.

And at their ears the sound
of the war. They are
not listening, not listening.