**Selection of 20th Century Poems**

Sonnet XXX Edna St Vincent Millay

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink  
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;   
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink   
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;   
Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,   
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;   
Yet many a man is making friends with death   
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.   
It well may be that in a difficult hour,   
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,   
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,   
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,   
Or trade the memory of this night for food.   
It well may be. I do not think I would.

[Elegy](https://www.poetry.net/poem/9365/elegy) by Millay

Let them bury your big eyes  
In the [secret](https://www.definitions.net/definition/secret) earth securely,  
Your thin fingers, and your fair,  
Soft, indefinite-colored hair,—  
All of [these](https://www.definitions.net/definition/these) in some way, surely,  
From the [secret](https://www.definitions.net/definition/secret) earth [shall](https://www.definitions.net/definition/shall) rise;  
Not for [these](https://www.definitions.net/definition/these) I sit and stare,  
Broken and [bereft](https://www.definitions.net/definition/bereft) completely;  
Your [young](https://www.definitions.net/definition/young) flesh that sat so neatly  
On your [little](https://www.definitions.net/definition/little) bones will sweetly  
Blossom in the air.  
  
But your voice,—never the rushing  
Of a [river](https://www.definitions.net/definition/river) underground,  
Not the [rising](https://www.definitions.net/definition/rising) of the wind  
In the [trees](https://www.definitions.net/definition/trees) before the rain,  
Not the woodcock's [watery](https://www.definitions.net/definition/watery) call,  
Not the note the white-throat utters,  
Not the feet of [children](https://www.definitions.net/definition/children) pushing  
Yellow [leaves](https://www.definitions.net/definition/leaves) along the gutters  
In the blue and [bitter](https://www.definitions.net/definition/bitter) fall,  
Shall [content](https://www.definitions.net/definition/content) my [musing](https://www.definitions.net/definition/musing) mind  
For the [beauty](https://www.definitions.net/definition/beauty) of that sound  
That in no new way at all  
Ever will be [heard](https://www.definitions.net/definition/heard) again.  
  
Sweetly [through](https://www.definitions.net/definition/through) the [sappy](https://www.definitions.net/definition/sappy) stalk  
Of the [vigorous](https://www.definitions.net/definition/vigorous) weed,  
Holding all it held before,  
Cherished by the [faithful](https://www.definitions.net/definition/faithful) sun,  
On and on eternally  
Shall your [altered](https://www.definitions.net/definition/altered) fluid run,  
Bud and [bloom](https://www.definitions.net/definition/bloom) and go to seed;  
But your [singing](https://www.definitions.net/definition/singing) days are done;  
But the [music](https://www.definitions.net/definition/music) of your talk  
Never [shall](https://www.definitions.net/definition/shall) the chemistry  
Of the [secret](https://www.definitions.net/definition/secret) earth restore.  
All your [lovely](https://www.definitions.net/definition/lovely) words are spoken.  
Once the [ivory](https://www.definitions.net/definition/ivory) box is broken,  
Beats the [golden](https://www.definitions.net/definition/golden) bird no more.

[Mist In The Valley](https://www.poetry.net/poem/9403/mist-in-the-valley) by Millay

These hills, to hurt me more,  
That am hurt [already](https://www.definitions.net/definition/already) enough,—   
Having left the sea behind,  
Having [turned](https://www.definitions.net/definition/turned) suddenly and left the shore  
That I had [loved](https://www.definitions.net/definition/loved) beyond all words, even a song's words, to   
convey,  
  
And [built](https://www.definitions.net/definition/built) me a [house](https://www.definitions.net/definition/house) on [upland](https://www.definitions.net/definition/upland) acres,  
Sweet with the pinxter, [bright](https://www.definitions.net/definition/bright) and rough  
With the [rusty](https://www.definitions.net/definition/rusty) blackbird long [before](https://www.definitions.net/definition/before) the winter's done,  
But [smelling](https://www.definitions.net/definition/smelling) never of [bayberry](https://www.definitions.net/definition/bayberry) hot in the sun,  
Nor ever loud with the [pounding](https://www.definitions.net/definition/pounding) of the long [white](https://www.definitions.net/definition/white) breakers,—   
  
These hills, [beneath](https://www.definitions.net/definition/beneath) the [October](https://www.definitions.net/definition/October) moon,  
Sit in the [valley](https://www.definitions.net/definition/valley) white with mist  
Like [islands](https://www.definitions.net/definition/islands) in a [quiet](https://www.definitions.net/definition/quiet) bay,  
  
Jut out from [shore](https://www.definitions.net/definition/shore) into the mist,  
Wooded with [poplar](https://www.definitions.net/definition/poplar) dark as pine,  
Like [points](https://www.definitions.net/definition/points) of land into a [quiet](https://www.definitions.net/definition/quiet) bay.  
  
(Just in the way  
The [harbour](https://www.definitions.net/definition/harbour) met the bay)  
  
Stricken too sore for tears,  
I stand, [remembering](https://www.definitions.net/definition/remembering) the [Islands](https://www.definitions.net/definition/Islands) and the sea's lost sound—   
Life at its best no [longer](https://www.definitions.net/definition/longer) than the sand-peep's cry,  
And I two years, two years,  
Tilling an [upland](https://www.definitions.net/definition/upland) ground!

**DYLAN THOMAS**

DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT\*

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;   
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
  
Though wise men at their end know dark is right,  
Because their words had forked no lightning they  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
  
Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright  
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
  
Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
  
Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight  
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  
  
And you, my father, there on that sad height,  
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.  
Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

\*This poem is written in the Villanelle form. Do you know your odes from your elegies, your laments from your dramatic monologues? Villanelles from sonnets?

**Fern Hill \*\***

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
The night above the dingle starry,  
Time let me hail and climb  
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
Trail with daisies and barley  
Down the rivers of the windfall light.  
  
And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
In the sun that is young once only,  
Time let me play and be  
Golden in the mercy of his means,  
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and  
cold,  
And the sabbath rang slowly  
In the pebbles of the holy streams.  
  
All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay  
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was  
air  
And playing, lovely and watery  
And fire green as grass.  
And nightly under the simple stars  
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,  
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the  
nightjars  
Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
Flashing into the dark.  
  
And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
The sky gathered again  
And the sun grew round that very day.  
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking  
warm  
Out of the whinnying green stable  
On to the fields of praise.  
  
And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
In the sun born over and over,  
I ran my heedless ways,  
My wishes raced through the house high hay  
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
Before the children green and golden  
Follow him out of grace.  
  
Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would  
take me  
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
In the moon that is always rising,  
Nor that riding to sleep  
I should hear him fly with the high fields  
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
Time held me green and dying  
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

\*\*This poem employs a kind of assonant half-rhyme. Do you know your assonance from your alliteration?

**Autumn Song** by WH Auden

Now the leaves are falling fast,  
    Nurse's flowers will not last;  
    Nurses to the graves are gone,  
    And the prams go rolling on.  
  
    Whispering neighbours, left and right,  
    Pluck us from the real delight;  
    And the active hands must freeze  
    Lonely on the separate knees.  
  
    Dead in hundreds at the back  
    Follow wooden in our track,  
    Arms raised stiffly to reprove  
    In false attitudes of love.  
  
    Starving through the leafless wood  
    Trolls run scolding for their food;  
    And the nightingale is dumb,  
    And the angel will not come.  
  
    Cold, impossible, ahead  
    Lifts the mountain's lovely head  
    Whose white waterfall could bless  
    Travellers in their last distress.

**Musee des Beaux Arts** by WH Auden

About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
Its human position: how it takes place  
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;  
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
They never forgot  
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot  
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

**Money**

By [Philip Larkin](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)

Quarterly, is it, money reproaches me:

    ‘Why do you let me lie here wastefully?

I am all you never had of goods and sex.

    You could get them still by writing a few cheques.’

So I look at others, what they do with theirs:

    They certainly don’t keep it upstairs.

By now they’ve a second house and car and wife:

    Clearly money has something to do with life

—In fact, they’ve a lot in common, if you enquire:

    You can’t put off being young until you retire,

And however you bank your screw, the money you save

    Won’t in the end buy you more than a shave.

I listen to money singing. It’s like looking down

    From long french windows at a provincial town,

The slums, the canal, the churches ornate and mad

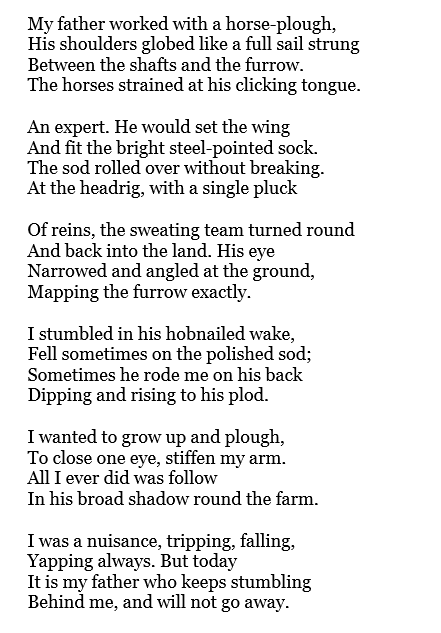
    In the evening sun. It is intensely sad.

**Afternoons** by Phillip Larkin

Summer is fading:  
The leaves fall in ones and twos  
From trees bordering  
The new recreation ground.  
In the hollows of afternoons  
Young mothers assemble  
At swing and sandpit  
Setting free their children.  
  
Behind them, at intervals,  
Stand husbands in skilled trades,  
An estateful of washing,  
And the albums, lettered  
Our Wedding, lying  
Near the television:  
Before them, the wind  
Is ruining their courting-places  
  
That are still courting-places  
(But the lovers are all in school),  
And their children, so intent on

Finding more unripe acrons,  
Expect to be taken home.  
Their beauty has thickened.  
Something is pushing them  
To the side of their own lives

**Follower** by Seamus Heaney



**Mint** by Seamus Heaney

It looked like a clump of small dusty nettles  
Growing wild at the gable of the house  
Beyond where we dumped our refuse and old bottles:  
Unverdant ever, almost beneath notice.

But, to be fair, it also spelled promise  
And newness in the back yard of our life  
As if something callow yet tenacious  
Sauntered in green alleys and grew rife.

The snip of scissor blades, the light of Sunday  
Mornings when the mint was cut and loved:  
My last things will be first things slipping from me.  
Yet let all things go free that have survived.

Let the smells of mint go heady and defenceless  
Like inmates liberated in that yard.  
Like the disregarded ones we turned against  
Because we’d failed them by our disregard.

**The Gravel Walks** by Seamus Heaney

River gravel. In the beginning, that.

High summer, and the angler's motorbike

Deep in roadside flowers, like a fallen knight

Whose ghost we'd lately questioned: 'Any luck?'

As the engines of the world prepared, green nuts

Dangled and clustered closer to the whirlpool.

The trees dipped down. The flints and sandstone-bits

Worked themselves smooth and smaller in a sparkle

Of shallow, hurrying barley-sugar water

Where minnows schooled that we scared when we played –

An eternity that ended once a tractor

Dropped its link-box in the gravel bed

And cement mixers began to come to life

And men in dungarees, like captive shades,

Mixed concrete, loaded, wheeled, turned, wheeled, as if

The Pharaoh's brickyards burned inside their heads.

Hoard and praise the verity of gravel.  
Gems for the undeluded. Milt of earth.  
Its plain, champing song against the shovel   
Soundtests and sandblasts words like 'honest worth'.  
  
Beautiful in or out of the river,  
The kingdom of gravel was inside you too  
Deep down, far back, clear water running over  
Pebbles of caramel, hailstone, mackerel-blue.  
  
But the actual washed stuff kept you slow and steady  
As you went stooping with your barrow full  
Into an absolution of the body,  
The shriven life tired bones and marrow feel.  
  
So **walk on air against your better judgement**  
establishing yourself somewhere in between  
Those solid batches mixed with grey cement  
And a tune called 'The Gravel Walks' that conjures green.