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To Matilda, Tabitha and all cats,
to whom sleep is so important, with all my love.

100 POEMS TO HELP YOU SLEEP

EDITED BY JANE MCMORLAND HUNTER

BATSFORD

Introduction

One of my fondest memories of childhood were the outings we called the Night-Nights. Looking back I suspect they were merely a detour when we went to collect eggs from the nearby farm and probably only happened once a week but, in my mind, they were an almost nightly occurrence where we drove slowly round the countryside saying goodnight. After collecting the eggs we visited the horses and then two huge bulls, Monty and George. We collected wild flowers, waved at train drivers and watched the sunset. It was the perfect end to the day. Now I often recreate that sense of calm by reading a poem.

Since ancient times, poetry has been renowned for its healing qualities and the aim of this collection of poetry is to gently guide you into a mood for sleep. It is deliberately not divided into chapters so the reader can work their way straight through or dip in at random. However I have arranged the poems in a loose order which moves from early evening through twilight and dusk with lullabies leading towards night with the moon and stars. Then there are poems on sleep and dreams and finally a section on general contentment. They span the breadth of the world over five hundred years and include the obvious pieces as well as lesser-known works which I hope will surprise and delight.

In an ideal world, evening marks the moment when the work of the day is done and it is time to

go home. The natural world also settles with day birds returning to their nests and animals to their dens or lairs. Many poets reflect on the passing of a satisfactory day, looking at the lives of shepherds and farm-workers and, although I suspect these lives may be seen through rose-tinted spectacles, they create an image of calm and well-earned rest.

At some point in the evening it becomes twilight, possibly my favourite word in the English language. Technically, this is the time when the sun is below the horizon but its rays still, partially, illuminate the atmosphere. This scientific definition is of little concern here; thanks to poetry we have a god of evening leaning out of a band of dull gold (D. H. Lawrence), a spirit from diviner air sensed by Ethelwyn Wetherald and a time that creeps wearing shadowy garments as glimpsed by E. Pauline Johnson, also known as Tekahionwake.

In childhood we are read lullabies to calm us in the evening and send us to sleep. Why, as adults, should we not continue this delightful practice? Some here are aimed at children, others look from a more adult perspective. Half past eight seems a crucial time – do we go up the stairs unwillingly or of our own choice?

The night is a time for sleep but much of the world is more beautiful in the dark and some of the poems in this collection celebrate, rather than fear, wakefulness. Stars, whether real or in the form of

fireflies, and the moon and its magical light more than make up for a little lost sleep. All these have scientific explanations but there is a time when one should ignore the learned astronomers and follow Walt Whitman, enjoy the night-air and simply marvel at the stars and moon.

Counting sheep may be the traditional way to encourage sleep but here watching sport, lying amongst wild flowers, enjoying solitude or the comfort of a lover are all recommended. My favourite suggestion is that of Roger Robinson: keep a portable Paradise in your pocket, which you can take out and release wherever you are. By day we are often shackled to duty but night is the time when our spirits can roam free. According to E. Nesbit, night has a kindlier heart: 'Day keeps us prisoned close but Night / Lifts off Day's chains'. The ghosts of the night have the power to terrify but the ones here are benign, those that wander by the wizard oak or fairy stream of William Motherwell must surely be kind. Dreams too are gentle here and never descend into nightmares. They allow us to be together with lost ones with no fear of separation, allow our wildest fancies to wander free and, in the wonderful words of Sara Teasdale, allow us to love and sleep at the same time.

Midnight is the turning point of each day, a moment most of us miss but it gives us a new chance ''Tis the hour of endings, ended / Of beginnings unbegun' (Louisa Bevington) and, for Nikita Gill there is magic at midnight, a chance for us to mend, restore and recover all we thought was lost.

The final poems focus on contentment, the ability to find peace and calm regardless of age, creed or situation. Whatever we have done or how the day has left us, sleep should bring rest and recuperation so we are ready for a new, and, if necessary, better day. Gently unwinding, casting off the cares of the day and preparing ourselves for sleep with a poem is the perfect way to enjoy the evening and ensure that one is prepared for a good night's sleep.