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Opening Extract from...

Poetry Please

The Nation's Best Loved Poems

Foreword by Roger McGough

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POETRY PLEASE

foreword by

Roger McGough



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FOREWORD

Hello and welcome to BBC Radio 4's *Poetry Please* and a very special edition of the world's longest-running and most-popular radio programme devoted to poetry: a programme that is made by you, its listeners, and which broadcasts your requests so that you can hear the poems you love, the poems you need, the poems you remember and the poems you'd like others to know.

Welcome, then, to a collection of *Poetry Please* favourites, selected by you. Or rather, welcome to *the* collection of *Poetry Please* favourites. I say '*the*' collection because in this book are over 350 poems reflecting the very best of the nation's poetic tastes since October 1979 when the first edition of the programme was broadcast.

As we do every week when we are on the air, we have knelt down once again at the fabled filing cabinets that store your requested poems in the *Poetry Please* office and from them have produced this collection of your favourites. The 350 poems here have all been asked for more than once in the programme's history. Many of them have been heard many times. We are forever stooping to those cabinets and drawing upon our listeners' requests to make and shape the programmes. In the process we have given our knees for poetry. But it's a small price to pay.

Poetry Please has been successful because it is simple. The poems we broadcast are the poems people want to hear. A line half remembered from school, a poem for a funeral, verses for a new baby or an old love – poetry lodges with us and we share the shelter it offers. Moments of raw grief and sadness

make up part of what we are, as well as joy and celebration. And laughter. Although the programme takes its commitment to spreading the good news of poetry very seriously, it is never afraid to laugh at itself.

All the programme has to do is narrow as far as possible the gap between a poem's source and its destination. I sit in a studio with a sheaf of poems, a tray of your letters, emails and phone messages, and a couple of actors (sometimes a poet or two) and we make magic happen. The same magic is just as readily found in the pages of this book. Open it on any poem and let it all sink in: evidence of a nation whose heartbeat is poetry itself.

All my favourite poets from the past are represented here, including Charles Causley, Edna St Vincent Millay, A. S. J. Tessimond, as well as living writers such as Paul Durcan and Billy Collins. The hope is that you too will find among these pages your own favourites, as well as discovering new voices that will resonate and uplift.

Another lyrical hero is Robert Frost whose 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is the most requested poem on *Poetry Please*, and it is interesting to me that I first came to that poem not by reading it in a book, but through listening to the poet himself reading it on television. It has often been the case that the spoken rather than the written word provides the spark that ignites a poem. The chart for the Top 10 most broadcast poems appears at the end of this Foreword.

Although some poems may seem difficult, and occasionally impenetrable, poetry is not elitist, and I have witnessed in my own versifying lifetime, a surge in popularity of the spoken word, and of poems that appeal to the heart as well as the head. Hopefully we will never take for granted the soft voices that speak truths so eloquently on *Poetry Please* each week.

Making the programme is a continuing education in itself. First in poetry: it is wonderful that so many people carry so much poetry with them, stowed in their minds and in their hearts and ready to be put to use in all sorts of ways (not always happily, it must be said – we often hear from people trying to get lines of stray verse out of their heads). Second, making *Poetry Please* offers wider lessons in humankind: it corrects any easy notion of poetry as being exclusive, or old fashioned, or only for people whose teachers made them learn lines by rote in the old black and white days. People get on with their lives and poetry keeps pace with them – it is as simple as that. Nothing that has happened to our species is beyond poetry, and poetry earns its keep by being there at every corner in every life. On *Poetry Please*, on Radio 4, and here between these covers we are simply listening in on the conversation.

In 2009, *Poetry Please* celebrated its thirtieth birthday, and to mark that occasion I wrote a *cento*, a Latin word meaning 'cloak': in other words, a poem made up of lines from other poems. The poems I chose feature frequently on the programme and there are twelve poets in all, from Thomas Hardy to Adrian Mitchell by way of John Donne and John Cooper Clarke. The poem appears overleaf.

If you would like to hear a favourite poem on the programme, you can e-mail me on poetry.please@bbc.co.uk, call 03700 100 400 or write to *Poetry Please*, BBC Bristol BS8 2LR.

Thank you for listening. Goodbye.

ROGER MCGOUGH

The Great Lover

I have been so great a lover: filled my days
So proudly with the splendour of Love's praise,
The pain, the calm, and the astonishment,
Desire illimitable, and still content,
And all dear names men use, to cheat despair,
For the perplexed and viewless streams that bear
Our hearts at random down the dark of life.
Now, ere the unthinking silence on that strife
Steals down, I would cheat drowsy Death so far,
My night shall be remembered for a star
That outshone all the suns of all men's days.
Shall I not crown them with immortal praise
Whom I have loved, who have given me, dared
with me
High secrets, and in darkness knelt to see
The inenarrable godhead of delight?
Love is a flame: – we have beaconed the world's night.
A city: – and we have built it, these and I.
An emperor: – we have taught the world to die.
So, for their sakes I loved, ere I go hence,
And the high cause of Love's magnificence,
And to keep loyalties young, I'll write those names
Golden for ever, eagles, crying flames,
And set them as a banner, that men may know,
To dare the generations, burn, and blow
Out on the wind of Time, shining and streaming. . . .
These I have loved:
White plates and cups, clean-
gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;

Wet roofs, beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;
And radiant raindrops couching in cool flowers;
And flowers themselves, that sway through sunny hours,
Dreaming of moths that drink them under the moon;
Then, the cool kindliness of sheets, that soon
Smooth away trouble; and the rough male kiss
Of blankets; grainy wood; live hair that is
Shining and free; blue-massing clouds; the keen
Unpassioned beauty of a great machine;
The benison of hot water; furs to touch;
The good smell of old clothes; and others such –
The comfortable smell of friendly fingers,
Hair's fragrance, and the musty reek that lingers
About dead leaves and last year's ferns. . . .
Dear names,
And thousand other throng to me! Royal flames;
Sweet water's dimpling laugh from tap or spring;
Holes in the ground; and voices that do sing;
Voices in laughter, too; and body's pain,
Soon turned to peace; and the deep-panting train;
Firm sands; the little dulling edge of foam
That browns and dwindles as the wave goes home;
And washen stones, gay for an hour; the cold
Graveness of iron; moist black earthen mould;
Sleep; and high places; footprints in the dew;
And oaks; and brown horse-chestnuts, glossy-new;
And new-peeled sticks; and shining pools on grass; –
All these have been my loves. And these shall pass,
Whatever passes not, in the great hour,
Nor all my passion, all my prayers, have power
To hold them with me through the gate of Death.

They'll play deserter, turn with the traitor breath,
Break the high bond we made, and sell Love's trust
And sacramented covenant to the dust.
– Oh, never a doubt but, somewhere, I shall wake,
And give what's left of love again, and make
New friends, now strangers. . . .
But the best I've known
Stays here, and changes, breaks, grows old, is blown
About the winds of the world, and fades from brains
Of living men, and dies.
Nothing remains.

O dear my loves, O faithless, once again
This one last gift I give: that after men
Shall know, and later lovers, far-removed,
Praise you, 'All these were lovely'; say, 'He loved.'

RUPERT BROOKE

As Kingfishers Catch Fire

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is –
Christ – for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Blackberry-Picking

for Philip Hobsbaum

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our
boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

SEAMUS HEANEY