Poems

The Death of the Bird

For every bird there is this last migration:
Once more the cooling year kindles her heart;
With a warm passage to the summer station
Love pricks the course in lights across the chart.

Year after year a speck on the map, divided
By a whole hemisphere, summons her to come;
Season after season, sure and safely guided,
Going away she is also coming home.

And being home, memory becomes a passion,
With which she feeds her brood and straws her nest,
Aware of ghosts that haunt the heart's possession.
And exiled love mourning within the breast.

The sands are green with a mirage of valleys;
The palm-tree casts a shadow not its own;
Down the long architrave of temple or palace
Blows a cool air from moorland scarps of stone.

And day by day the whisper of love grows stronger;
That delicate voice, more urgent with despair,
Custom and fear constraining her no longer,
Drives her at last on the waste leagues of air.

A vanishing speck in those inane dominions,
Single and frail, uncertain of her place,
Alone in the bright host of her companions,
Lost in the blue unfriendliness of space,

She feels it close now, the appointed season:
The invisible thread is broken as she flies;
Suddenly, without warning, without reason,
The guiding spark of instinct winks and dies.

Try as she will, the trackless world delivers
No way, the wilderness of light no sign,
The immense and complex map of hills and rivers
Mocks her small wisdom with its vast design.

And darkness rises from the eastern valleys,
And the winds buffet her with their hungry breath,
And the great earth, with neither grief nor malice,
Receives the tiny burden of her death.

Alec Hope
The First Kingdom

The royal roads were cow paths. 
The queen mother hunkered on a stool
and played the harpstrings of milk
into a wooden pail.
With seasoned sticks the nobles
lorded it over the hindquarters of cattle

Units of measurement were pondered
by the cartful, barrowful and bucketful.
Time was a backward rote of names and mishaps,
bad harvests, fires, unfair settlements,
deaths in floods, murders and miscarriages.

And if my rights to it all came only
by their acclamation, what was it worth?
I blew hot and blew cold.
They were two-faced and accommodating.
And seed, breed and generation still
they are holding on, every bit
as pious and exacting and demeaned.

Seamus Heaney

Lucifer in Starlight

On a starr’d night Prince Lucifer uprose.
Tired of his dark dominion swung the fiend
Above the rolling ball in cloud part screen’d,
Where sinners hugg’d their spectre of repose.
Poor prey to his hot fit of pride were those.
And now upon his western wing he lean’d,
Now his huge bulk o’er Afric’s sands careen’d,
Now the black planet shadow’d Arctic snows.
Soaring through wider zones that prick’d his scars
With memory of the old revolt from Awe,
He reach’d a middle height, and at the stars,
Which are the brain of heaven, he look’d, and sank.
Around the ancient track march’d, rank on rank,
The army of unalterable law.

George Meredith

The World

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair;
    But all night as the moon so changeth she;
Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy,
And subtle serpents gliding in her hair.
By day she woos me to the outer air,
    Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:
But thro’ the night a beast she grins at me,
A very monster void of love and prayer.
By day she stands a lie: by night she stands
In all the naked horror of the truth,
With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands.
Is this a friend indeed, that I should sell
My soul to her, give her my life and youth,
Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?

Christina Rossetti

Request to a Year

If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the attitude
Of my great-great-grandmother,
Legendary devotee of the arts,

who, having had eight children
and little opportunity for painting pictures,
sat one day on a high rock
beside a river in Switzerland

and from a difficult distance viewed
her second son, balanced on a small ice-floe,
drift down the current towards a waterfall
that struck rock-bottom eighty feet below,

while her second daughter, impeded,
no doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
stretched out a last-hope alpenstock—*(which luckily later caught him on his way).

Nothing, it was evident, could be done;
and with the artist’s isolating eye
my great-great-grandmother hastily sketched the scene.
The sketch survives to prove the story by.

Year, if you have no Mother’s day present planned;
Reach back and bring me the firmness of her hand.

Judith Wright

Lines Written In Early Spring

I Heard a thousand blended notes,
While in a grove I sate reclined,
In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts
Bring sad thoughts to the mind.
To her fair works did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What man has made of man.

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,
The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;
And ’tis my faith that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

The birds around me hopped and played,
Their thoughts I cannot measure:-
But the least motion which they made
It seemed a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,
To catch the breezy air;
And I must think, do all I can,
That there was pleasure there.

If this belief from heaven be sent,
If such be Nature’s holy plan,
Have I not reason to lament
What man has made of man?

William Wordsworth

In a Valley of Peace

This long green valley sloping to the sun,
With dimpling, silver waters loitering through;
The sky that bends above me, mild and blue;
The wide, still wheat-fields, yellowing one by one,
And all the peaceful sounds when day is done –
    I cannot bear their clam monotony!
Great God! I want the thunder of the sea!
I want to feel the wild red lightnings run
Around, about me; hear the bellowing surf,
    And breathe the tempest’s sibilant, sobbing breath;
To face the elements, defying death,
And fling myself prone on the spray-beat turf,
    And hear the strong waves trampling wind and rain,
Like herds of beasts upon a mighty plain.

Ella Higginson

The Departing Island

Strange to see it – how as we lean over
this vague rail, the island goes away
into its loved light grown suddenly foreign:
how the ship slides outward like a cold ray
from a sun turned cloudy, and rough land draws down
into an abstract sea its arranged star.

Strange how it’s like a dream when two waves past,
and the engine’s hum puts villages out of mind
or shakes them together in a waving fashion.
The lights stream northward down a wolfish wind.
A pacing passenger wears the air of one
whom tender arms and fleshly hands embraced.

It’s the island that goes away, not we who leave it.
Like an unbearable thought it sinks beyond
assiduous reasoning light and wringing hands,
or, as a flower roots deep into the ground,
it works its darkness into the gay winds
that blow about us in a later spirit.

Iain Crichton Smith

Mid-winter Waking

Stirring suddenly from long hibernation,
I knew myself once more a poet
Guarded by timeless principalities
Against the worm of death, this hillside haunting;
And presently dared open both my eyes.

O gracious, lofty, shone against from under,
Back-of-the-mind-far clouds like towers;
And you, sudden warm airs that blow
Before the expected season of new blossom,
While sheep still gnaw at roots and lambless go—

Be witness that on waking, this mid-winter,
I found her hand in mine laid closely
Who shall watch out the Spring with me.
We stared in silence all around us
But found no winter anywhere to see.

Robert Graves

The Sea

Sitting on an upturned boat
in the green middle of a roundabout
overlooked by towers and crenellations,
she watched the cars curve by
and waited. Overhead, the gulls
kaokaoed the blue of the sky
where fat clouds floated, and a lone bee
was higher than ever before.
She looked at her handbag watch
just as a truckdriver hooted.
She glanced towards Aberdeen.
She felt the keys in her bag
and thought of the house on the island
where six years ago she’d eaten
an omelette of twelve quails’ eggs
washed down with Chablis.
She’d hardly get there tonight.
Old pictures assaulted her,
floated in the haze – memories of
twenty or more black sheep
in a field that stopped at the sea.
And hundreds of gulls spread out
behind a ploughing tractor.
And a herd of lying-down cows.
And a cemetery in a golf course
that bordered the sea. All these
were waiting, but she was stuck
in the green middle of the roundabout,
sitting on the upturned boat,
and the sea stayed where it was.

Matthew Sweeney