



# The Road Not Taken

An anthology for National  
Poetry Day curated by  
The Reader



National  
POETRY  
Day 7 October  
2021



The  
Reader

# About this anthology

National Poetry Day is the annual mass celebration on the first Thursday of October that encourages all to enjoy, discover and share poetry. This year, National Poetry Day takes place on 7th October and the theme is Choice. The Reader has created this anthology in association with Forward Arts Foundation, the organisational and creative force behind National Poetry Day.

The Reader is a national charity bringing about a Reading Revolution across the UK and around the world. We want everyone to experience and enjoy great literature, which we believe is a tool for helping humans survive and live well. Through a growing movement of more than 1,000 volunteers and through our partners we bring groups of people together each week to share and discuss great novels, short stories and poems. We call this Shared Reading.

All the poems in this short anthology take up the theme of Choice, exploring ideas of freedom and free will, how we choose to express ourselves, how we learn to live with the choices we make and how they shape our lives and personalities. This anthology has been put together with Shared Reading in mind, but the poems can be read alone and provide a few quiet moments of reflection.

Many of the poems are taken from The Reader’s Bookshelf, a carefully curated selection of literature which shapes our reading and programming each year. Visit [www.thereader.org.uk](http://www.thereader.org.uk) to find out more about this year’s Bookshelf.

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# The Road Not Taken

by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

from *The Collected Poems*  
(Vintage Classics, 2013)  
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# Poem

by T'ao Ch'ien

translated by Arthur Waley

In the quiet of the morning I heard a knock at my door:  
I threw on my clothes and opened it myself.  
I asked who it was who had come so early to see me:  
He said he was a peasant, coming with good intent.  
He brought a present of wine and rice-soup,  
Believing that I had fallen on evil days.  
'You live in rags under a thatched roof  
And seem to have no desire for a better lot.  
The rest of mankind have all the same ambitions:  
You, too, must learn to wallow in their mire.'  
'Old man, I am impressed by what you say,  
But my soul is not fashioned like other men's.  
To drive in their rut I might perhaps learn:  
To be untrue to myself could only lead to muddle.  
Let us drink and enjoy together the wine you have brought:  
For my course is set and cannot now be altered.'

from *170 Chinese Poems*  
(Constable, 1987)  
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## What If This Road

by Sheenagh Pugh

What if this road, that has held no surprises  
these many years, decided not to go  
home after all; what if it could turn  
left or right with no more ado  
than a kite-tail? What if its tarry skin  
were like a long, supple bolt of cloth,  
that is shaken and rolled out, and takes  
a new shape from the contours beneath?  
And if it chose to lay itself down  
in a new way; around a blind corner,  
across hills you must climb without knowing  
what's on the other side; who would not hanker  
to be going, at all risks? Who wants to know  
a story's end, or where a road will go?

from *What If This Road and Other Poems*  
(Gwalch Carreg Cyf, Llanrwst 2003)  
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## I Go Back to May 1937

by Sharon Olds

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,  
I see my father strolling out  
under the ochre sandstone arch, the  
red tiles glinting like bent  
plates of blood behind his head, I  
see my mother with a few light books at her hip  
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks,  
the wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its  
sword-tips aglow in the May air,  
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,  
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are  
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.  
I want to go up to them and say Stop,  
don't do it – she's the wrong woman,  
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things  
you cannot imagine you would ever do,  
you are going to do bad things to children,  
you are going to suffer in ways you have not heard of,  
you are going to want to die. I want to go  
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,  
her hungry pretty face turning to me,  
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,  
his arrogant handsome face turning to me,  
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,  
but I don't do it. I want to live. I  
take them up like the male and female  
paper dolls and bang them together  
at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to  
strike sparks from them, I say  
Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

from *Selected Poems*  
(Jonathan Cape, 2005)  
Copyright © Sharon Olds 2005

# The God Who Loves You

by Carl Dennis

It must be troubling for the god who loves you  
To ponder how much happier you'd be today  
Had you been able to glimpse your many futures.  
It must be painful for him to watch you on Friday evenings  
Driving home from the office, content with your week –  
Three fine houses sold to deserving families –  
Knowing as he does exactly what would have happened  
Had you gone to your second choice for college,  
Knowing the roommate you'd have been allotted  
Whose ardent opinions on painting and music  
Would have kindled in you a lifelong passion.  
A life thirty points above the life you're living  
On any scale of satisfaction. And every point  
A thorn in the side of the god who loves you.  
You don't want that, a large-souled man like you  
Who tries to withhold from your wife the day's disappointments  
So she can save her empathy for the children.  
And would you want this god to compare your wife  
With the woman you were destined to meet on the other campus?  
It hurts you to think of him ranking the conversation  
You'd have enjoyed over there higher in insight  
Than the conversation you're used to.  
And think how this loving god would feel  
Knowing that the man next in line for your wife  
Would have pleased her more than you ever will  
Even on your best days, when you really try.  
Can you sleep at night believing a god like that  
Is pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives  
You're spared by ignorance? The difference between what is  
And what could have been will remain alive for him  
Even after you cease existing, after you catch a chill

Running out in the snow for the morning paper,  
Losing eleven years that the god who loves you  
Will feel compelled to imagine scene by scene  
Unless you come to the rescue by imagining him  
No wiser than you are, no god at all, only a friend  
No closer than the actual friend you made at college,  
The one you haven't written in months. Sit down tonight  
And write him about the life you can talk about  
With a claim to authority, the life you've witnessed,  
Which for all you know is the life you've chosen.

from *Practical Gods*  
(Viking, Penguin Random House, 2001)  
Copyright © Carl Dennis 2001.





## Choice

by Emily Dickinson

Of all the souls that stand create  
I have elected one.  
When sense from spirit files away,  
And subterfuge is done;

When that which is and that which was  
Apart, intrinsic, stand,  
And this brief tragedy of flesh  
Is shifted like a sand;

When figures show their royal front  
And mists are carved away, –  
Behold the atom I preferred  
To all the lists of clay!

from *The Complete Poems*  
(Faber & Faber, 2016)



## Often Rebuked, Yet Always Back Returning

by Emily Bronte

Often rebuked, yet always back returning  
To those first feelings that were born with me,  
And leaving busy chase of wealth and learning  
For idle dreams of things which cannot be:

Today, I will seek not the shadowy region;  
Its unsustaining vastness waxes drear;  
And visions rising, legion after legion,  
Bring the unreal world too strangely near.

I'll walk, but not in old heroic traces,  
And not in paths of high morality,  
And not among the half-distinguished faces,  
The clouded forms of long-past history.

I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:  
It vexes me to choose another guide:  
Where the grey flocks in ferny glens are feeding;  
Where the wild wind blows on the mountain side.

What have those lonely mountains worth revealing?  
More glory and more grief than I can tell:  
The earth that wakes *one* human heart to feeling  
Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell.

from *The Complete Poems*  
(Penguin Classics, 1992)

# Book of Genesis

by Kei Miller

Suppose there was a book full of only the word,  
*let* – from whose clipped sound all things begin: fir  
and firmament, feather, the first whale – and suppose

we could scroll through its pages every day  
to find and pronounce a *Let* meant only for us –  
we would stumble through the streets with open books,

eyes crossed from too much reading; we would speak  
in auto-rhyme, the world would echo itself – and still  
we'd continue in rounds, saying *let* and *let* and *let*

until even silent dreams had been allowed.

from *There is an Anger That Moves*  
(Carcanet Press, 2007)  
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# from *Paradise Lost*

by John Milton

*In this extract, Satan jealously watches Adam and Eve in Eden  
and plots their downfall.*

'Sight hateful, sight tormenting! thus these two,  
Imparadised in one another's arms,  
The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill  
Of bliss on bliss; while I to Hell am thrust,  
Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,  
Among our other torments not the least,  
Still unfulfilled with pain of longing pines;  
Yet let me not forget what I have gained  
From their own mouths; All is not theirs, it seems:  
One fatal Tree there stands of Knowledge called,  
Forbidden them to taste: Knowledge forbidden?  
Suspicious, reasonless. Why should their Lord  
Envy them that? Can it be sin to know?  
Can it be death? And do they only stand  
By Ignorance, is that their happy state,  
The proof of their obedience and their faith?  
Oh fair foundation laid whereon to build  
Their ruin! Hence I will excite their minds  
With more desire to know, and to reject  
Envious commands, invented with design  
To keep them low whom knowledge might exalt  
Equal with Gods; aspiring to be such,  
They taste and die: What likelier can ensue?'

from *The Major Works of John Milton*  
(Oxford World's Classics 2008)

# Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room

by William Wordsworth

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;  
And hermits are contented with their cells;  
And students with their pensive citadels;  
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,  
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,  
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,  
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:  
In truth the prison, into which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,  
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound  
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;  
Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be)  
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,  
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

from *Selected Poetry*  
(Oxford World's Classics, 2008)



# Rebus

by Jane Hirshfield



You work with what you are given,  
the red clay of grief,  
the black clay of stubbornness going on after.  
Clay that tastes of care or carelessness,  
clay that smells of the bottoms of rivers or dust.

Each thought is a life you have lived or failed to live,  
each word is a dish you have eaten or left on the table.  
There are honeys so bitter  
no one would willingly choose to take them.  
The clay takes them: honey of weariness, honey of vanity,  
honey of cruelty, fear.

This rebus – slip and stubbornness,  
bottom of river, my own consumed life –  
when will I learn to read it  
plainly, slowly, uncolored by hope or desire?  
Not to understand it, only to see.

As water given sugar sweetens, given salt grows salty,  
we become our choices.  
Each yes, each *no* continues,  
this one a ladder, that one an anvil or cup.

The ladder leans into its darkness.  
The anvil leans into its silence.  
The cup sits empty.

How can I enter this question the clay has asked?

from *Each Happiness Ringed By Lions: Selected Poems*  
(Bloodaxe, 2005)  
Copyright © Jane Hirshfield 2001



# Che Fece... Il Gran Rifiuto

by C.P. Cavafy  
translated by Edmund Keeley

For some people the day comes  
when they have to declare the great Yes  
or the great No. It's clear at once who has the Yes  
ready within him; and saying it,

he goes from honour to honour, strong in his conviction.  
He who refuses does not repent. Asked again,  
he'd still say no. Yet that no – the right no –  
drags him down all his life.

from *Collected Poems*  
(Chatto & Windus, 1990)  
Copyright © C.P. Cavafy 1990



# The Mistake

by James Fenton

With the mistake your life goes in reverse.  
Now you can see exactly what you did  
Wrong yesterday and wrong the day before  
And each mistake leads back to something worse

And every nuance of your hypocrisy  
Towards yourself and every excuse  
Stands solidly on the perspective lines  
And there is perfect visibility.

What an enlightenment. The colonnade  
Rolls past on either side. You needn't move.  
The statues of your errors brush your sleeve.  
You watch the tale turn back – and you're dismayed.

And this dismay at this, this big mistake  
Is made worse by the sight of all those who  
Knew all along where these mistakes would lead –  
Those frozen friends who watched the crisis break.

Why didn't they say? Oh, but they did indeed –  
Said with a murmur when the time was wrong  
Or by a mild refusal to assent  
Or told you plainly but you would not heed.

Yes, you can hear them now. It hurts. It's worse  
Than any sneer from an enemy.  
Take this dismay. Lay claim to this mistake.  
Look straight along the lines of this reverse.

from *Yellow Tulips: Poems 1968–2011*  
(Faber & Faber, 2013)  
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# Phase One

by Dilruba Ahmed

For leaving the fridge open  
last night, I forgive you.  
For conjuring white curtains  
instead of living your life.

For the seedlings that wilt, now,  
in tiny pots, I forgive you.  
For saying *no* first  
but yes as an afterthought.

I forgive you for hideous visions  
after childbirth, brought on by loss  
of sleep. And when the baby woke  
repeatedly, for your silent rebuke

in the dark, 'What's your beef?'  
I forgive your letting vines  
overtake the garden. For fearing  
your own propensity to love.

For losing, again, your bag  
en route from San Francisco;  
for the equally heedless drive back  
on the caffeine-fueled return.

I forgive you for leaving  
windows open in rain  
and soaking library books  
again. For putting forth

only revisions of yourself,  
with punctuation worked over,  
instead of the disordered truth,  
I forgive you. For singing mostly

when the shower drowns  
your voice. For so admiring  
the drummer you failed to hear  
the drum. In forgotten tin cans,

may forgiveness gather. Pooling  
in gutters. Gushing from pipes.  
A great steady rain of olives  
from branches, relieved

of cruelty and petty meanness.  
With it, a flurry of wings, thirteen  
gray pigeons. Ointment reserved  
for healers and prophets. I forgive you.

I forgive you. For feeling awkward  
and nervous without reason.  
For bearing Keats's empty vessel  
with such calm you worried

you had, perhaps, no moral  
center at all. For treating your mother  
with contempt when she deserved  
compassion. I forgive you. I forgive

you. I forgive you. For growing  
a capacity for love that is great  
but matched only, perhaps,  
by your loneliness. For being unable

to forgive yourself first so you  
could then forgive others and  
at last find a way to become  
the love that you want in this world.

from *Bring Now the Angels*  
(University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020)  
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# Words

## by Edward Thomas

Out of us all  
That make rhymes,  
Will you choose  
Sometimes –  
As the winds use  
A crack in the wall  
Or a drain,  
Their joy or their pain  
To whistle through –  
Choose me,  
You English words?

I know you:  
You are light as dreams,  
Tough as oak,  
Precious as gold,  
As poppies and corn,  
Or an old cloak:  
Sweet as our birds  
To the ear,  
As the burnet rose  
In the heat  
Of Midsummer:  
Strange as the races  
Of dead and unborn:  
Strange and sweet,  
Equally,  
And familiar,  
To the eye,  
As the dearest faces  
That a man knows,  
And as lost homes are:  
But though older far  
Than oldest yew, –

As our hills are, old, –  
Worn new  
Again and again:  
Young as our streams  
After rain:  
And as dear  
As the earth which you prove  
That we love.

Make me content  
With some sweetness  
From Wales  
Whose nightingales  
Have no wings, –  
From Wiltshire and Kent  
And Herefordshire,  
And the villages there, –  
From the names, and the things  
No less.  
Let me sometimes dance  
With you,  
Or climb,  
Or stand perchance  
In ecstasy,  
Fixed and free  
In a rhyme,  
As poets do.

from *Collected Poems*  
(Faber & Faber, 2004)

This anthology has been made possible by Forward Arts Foundation,  
the producers of National Poetry Day.

Forward Arts Foundation believes everyone should have the opportunity  
to develop creativity and agency by making, experiencing and sharing  
poetry. We aim to promote public knowledge, understanding and enjoyment  
of poetry in the UK and Ireland. We are committed to widening poetry's  
audience, honouring achievement and supporting talent. Our programmes  
included National Poetry Day, the Forward Prizes for Poetry and the Forward  
Book of poetry, an annual anthology of the year's best poems.

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