

## Selected Poems for 2021 National Wenzao Cup English Poetry Reading Contest

### 1. Darkness

By Lord Byron (George Gordon)

I had a dream, which was not all a dream.  
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars  
Did wander darkling in the eternal space,  
Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth  
Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air;  
Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day,  
And men forgot their passions in the dread  
Of this their desolation; and all hearts  
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light:  
And they did live by watchfires—and the thrones,  
The palaces of crowned kings—the huts,  
The habitations of all things which dwell,  
Were burnt for beacons; cities were consum'd,  
And men were gather'd round their blazing homes  
To look once more into each other's face;  
Happy were those who dwelt within the eye  
Of the volcanos, and their mountain-torch:  
A fearful hope was all the world contain'd;  
Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour  
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks  
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black.  
The brows of men by the despairing light  
Wore an unearthly aspect, as by fits  
The flashes fell upon them; some lay down  
And hid their eyes and wept; and some did rest  
Their chins upon their clenched hands, and smil'd;  
And others hurried to and fro, and fed  
Their funeral piles with fuel, and look'd up  
With mad disquietude on the dull sky,  
The pall of a past world; and then again  
With curses cast them down upon the dust,  
And gnash'd their teeth and howl'd: the wild birds shriek'd  
And, terrified, did flutter on the ground,  
And flap their useless wings; the wildest brutes  
Came tame and tremulous; and vipers crawl'd  
And twin'd themselves among the multitude,  
Hissing, but stingless—they were slain for food.  
And War, which for a moment was no more,  
Did glut himself again: a meal was bought  
With blood, and each sate sullenly apart  
Gorging himself in gloom: no love was left;  
All earth was but one thought—and that was death  
Immediate and inglorious; and the pang

Of famine fed upon all entrails—men  
Died, and their bones were tombless as their flesh;  
The meagre by the meagre were devour'd,  
Even dogs assail'd their masters, all save one,  
And he was faithful to a corse, and kept  
The birds and beasts and famish'd men at bay,  
Till hunger clung them, or the dropping dead  
Lur'd their lank jaws; himself sought out no food,  
But with a piteous and perpetual moan,  
And a quick desolate cry, licking the hand  
Which answer'd not with a caress—he died.  
The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two  
Of an enormous city did survive,  
And they were enemies: they met beside  
The dying embers of an altar-place  
Where had been heap'd a mass of holy things  
For an unholy usage; they rak'd up,  
And shivering scrap'd with their cold skeleton hands  
The feeble ashes, and their feeble breath  
Blew for a little life, and made a flame  
Which was a mockery; then they lifted up  
Their eyes as it grew lighter, and beheld  
Each other's aspects—saw, and shriek'd, and died—  
Even of their mutual hideousness they died,  
Unknowing who he was upon whose brow  
Famine had written Fiend. The world was void,  
The populous and the powerful was a lump,  
Seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless—  
A lump of death—a chaos of hard clay.  
The rivers, lakes and ocean all stood still,  
And nothing stirr'd within their silent depths;  
Ships sailorless lay rotting on the sea,  
And their masts fell down piecemeal: as they dropp'd  
They slept on the abyss without a surge—  
The waves were dead; the tides were in their grave,  
The moon, their mistress, had expir'd before;  
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,  
And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no need  
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.

Source: Byron, George Gordon. "Darkness." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222ae1b](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222ae1b). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

## 2. Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.) By James Baldwin

In a strange house,  
a strange bed  
in a strange town,  
a very strange me  
is waiting for you.

Now  
it is very early in the morning.  
The silence is loud.  
The baby is walking about  
with his foaming bottle,  
making strange sounds  
and deciding, after all,  
to be my friend.

You  
arrive tonight.

How dull time is!  
How empty—and yet,  
since I am sitting here,  
lying here,  
walking up and down here,  
waiting,  
I see  
that time's cruel ability  
to make one wait  
is time's reality.

I see your hair  
which I call red.  
I lie here in this bed.

Someone teased me once,  
a friend of ours—  
saying that I saw your hair red  
because I was not thinking  
of the hair on your head.

Someone also told me,  
a long time ago:  
my father said to me,  
It is a terrible thing,  
son,  
to fall into the hands of the living God.  
Now,  
I know what he was saying.  
I could not have seen red

before finding myself  
in this strange, this waiting bed.  
Nor had my naked eye suggested  
that colour was created  
by the light falling, now,  
on me,  
in this strange bed,  
waiting  
where no one has ever rested!

The streets, I observe,  
are wintry.  
It feels like snow.  
Starlings circle in the sky,  
conspiring,  
together, and alone,  
unspeakable journeys  
into and out of the light.

I know  
I will see you tonight.  
And snow  
may fall  
enough to freeze our tongues  
and scald our eyes.  
We may never be found again!

Just as the birds above our heads  
circling  
are singing,  
knowing  
that, in what lies before them,  
the always unknown passage,  
wind, water, air,  
the failing light  
the failing night  
the blinding sun  
they must get the journey done.  
Listen.  
They have wings and voices  
are making choices  
are using what they have.  
They are aware  
that, on long journeys,  
each bears the other,  
whirring,  
stirring  
love occurring  
in the middle of the terrifying air.

Source: Baldwin, James, "Munich, Winter 1973 (for Y.S.)." *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*. Beacon, 2014, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222aeccc1b](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222aeccc1b). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

### 3. Lines Written Near San Francisco By Louis Simpson

I wake and feel the city trembling.  
Yes, there is something unsettled in the air  
And the earth is uncertain.

And so it was for the tenor Caruso.  
He couldn't sleep—you know how the ovation  
Rings in your ears, and you re-sing your part.

And then the ceiling trembled  
And the floor moved. He ran into the street.  
Never had Naples given him such a reception!

The air was darker than Vesuvius.  
"O mamma mia,"  
He cried, "I've lost my voice!"

At that moment the hideous voice of Culture,  
Hysterical woman, thrashing her arms and legs,  
Shrieked from the ruins.

At that moment everyone became a performer.  
Otello and Don Giovanni  
And Figaro strode on the midmost stage.

In the high window of a burning castle  
Lucia raved. Black horses  
Plunged through fire, dragging the wild bells.

The curtains were wrapped in smoke. Tin swords  
Were melting; masks and ruffs  
Burned—and the costumes of the peasants' chorus.

Night fell. The white moon rose  
And sank in the Pacific. The tremors  
Passed under the waves. And Death rested.

2  
Now, as we stand idle,  
Watching the silent, bowler-hatted man,  
The engineer, who writes in the smoking field;

Now as he hands the paper to a boy,  
Who takes it and runs to a group of waiting men,  
And they disperse and move toward their wagons,

Mules bray and the wagons move—  
Wait! Before you start

(Already the wheels are rattling on the stones)

Say, did your fathers cross the dry Sierras  
To build another London?  
Do Americans always have to be second-rate?

Wait! For there are spirits  
In the earth itself, or the air, or sea.  
Where are the aboriginal American devils?

Cloud shadows, pine shadows  
Falling across the bright Pacific bay ...  
(Already they have nailed rough boards together)

Wait only for the wind  
That rustles in the eucalyptus tree.  
Wait only for the light

That trembles on the petals of a rose.  
(The mortar sets—banks are the first to stand)  
Wait for a rose, and you may wait forever.

The silent man mops his head and drinks  
Cold lemonade. “San Francisco  
Is a city second only to Paris.”

3  
Every night, at the end of America  
We taste our wine, looking at the Pacific.  
How sad it is, the end of America!

While we were waiting for the land  
They’d finished it—with gas drums  
On the hilltops, cheap housing in the valleys

Where lives are mean and wretched.  
But the banks thrive and the realtors  
Rejoice—they have their America.

Still, there is something unsettled in the air.  
Out there on the Pacific  
There’s no America but the Marines.

Whitman was wrong about the People,  
But right about himself. The land is within.  
At the end of the open road we come to ourselves.

Though mad Columbus follows the sun  
Into the sea, we cannot follow.  
We must remain, to serve the returning sun,

And to set tables for death.  
For we are the colonists of Death—  
Not, as some think, of the English.

And we are preparing thrones for him to sit,  
Poems to read, and beds  
In which it may please him to rest.

This is the land  
The pioneers looked for, shading their eyes  
Against the sun—a murmur of serious life.

Source: Simpson, Louis. "Lines Written Near San Francisco." *Collected Poems*. Paragon House, 1988,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42823/lines-written-near-san-francisco](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42823/lines-written-near-san-francisco). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

## 4. A Hymn to Childhood

### By Li-Young Lee

Childhood? Which childhood?  
The one that didn't last?  
The one in which you learned to be afraid  
of the boarded-up well in the backyard  
and the ladder in the attic?

The one presided over by armed men  
in ill-fitting uniforms  
strolling the streets and alleys,  
while loudspeakers declared a new era,  
and the house around you grew bigger,  
the rooms farther apart, with more and more  
people missing?

The photographs whispered to each other  
from their frames in the hallway.  
The cooking pots said your name  
each time you walked past the kitchen.

And you pretended to be dead with your sister  
in games of rescue and abandonment.  
You learned to lie still so long  
the world seemed a play you viewed from the muffled  
safety of a wing. Look! In  
run the servants screaming, the soldiers shouting,  
turning over the furniture,  
smashing your mother's china.

Don't fall asleep.  
Each act opens with your mother  
reading a letter that makes her weep.  
Each act closes with your father fallen  
into the hands of Pharaoh.

Which childhood? The one that never ends? O you,  
still a child, and slow to grow.  
Still talking to God and thinking the snow  
falling is the sound of God listening,  
and winter is the high-ceilinged house  
where God measures with one eye  
an ocean wave in octaves and minutes,  
and counts on many fingers  
all the ways a child learns to say Me.

Which childhood?  
The one from which you'll never escape? You,  
so slow to know  
what you know and don't know.



Still thinking you hear low song  
in the wind in the eaves,  
story in your breathing,  
grief in the heard dove at evening,  
and plentitude in the unseen bird  
tolling at morning. Still slow to tell  
memory from imagination, heaven  
from here and now,  
hell from here and now,  
death from childhood, and both of them  
from dreaming.

Source: Lee, L-Young. "A Hymn to Childhood." *Behind My Eyes*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2008,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52209/a-hymn-to-childhood](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52209/a-hymn-to-childhood). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

## 5. Gifts of Rain

### By Seamus Heaney

I  
Cloudburst and steady downpour now  
for days.  
Still mammal,  
straw-footed on the mud,  
he begins to sense weather  
by his skin.

A nimble snout of flood  
Licks over stepping stones  
and goes uprooting.  
He fords  
his life by sounding.  
Soundings.

II  
A man wading lost fields  
breaks the pane of flood:  
  
a flower of mud-  
water blooms up to his reflection  
  
like a cut swaying  
its red spoors through a basin.

His hands grub  
where the spade has uncastled  
  
sunken drills, an atlantis  
he depends on. So  
he is hooped to where he planted  
and sky and ground  
  
are running naturally among his arms  
that grope the cropping land.

III  
When rains were gathering  
there would be an all-night  
roaring off the ford.  
Their world-schooled ear  
  
Could monitor the usual  
confabulations, the race  
unfurling past the gable,  
the Moyola harping on

its gravel beds:

all spouts by daylight  
brimmed with their own airs  
and overflowed each barrel

in long tresses.  
I cock my ear  
at an absence—  
in the shared calling of blood

arrives my need  
for antediluvian lore.  
Soft voices of the dead  
are whispering by the shore

that I would question  
(and for my children's sake)  
about crops rotted, river mud  
glazing the baked clay floor.

#### IV

The tawny guttural water  
spells itself: Moyola  
is its own score and consort,

bedding the locale  
in the utterance,  
reed music, an old chanter

breathing its mists  
through vowels and history.  
A swollen river,

a mating call of sound  
rises to pleasure me, Dives,  
hoarder of common ground.

Source: Heaney, Seamus. "Gifts of Rain." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=119&issue=5&page=38](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=119&issue=5&page=38). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

## 6. Hymn to Intellectual Beauty

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

The awful shadow of some unseen Power  
    Floats though unseen among us; visiting  
    This various world with as inconstant wing  
As summer winds that creep from flower to flower;  
Like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower,  
    It visits with inconstant glance  
    Each human heart and countenance;  
Like hues and harmonies of evening,  
    Like clouds in starlight widely spread,  
    Like memory of music fled,  
    Like aught that for its grace may be  
Dear, and yet dearer for its mystery.

Spirit of BEAUTY, that dost consecrate  
    With thine own hues all thou dost shine upon  
    Of human thought or form, where art thou gone?  
Why dost thou pass away and leave our state,  
This dim vast vale of tears, vacant and desolate?  
    Ask why the sunlight not for ever  
    Weaves rainbows o'er yon mountain-river,  
Why aught should fail and fade that once is shown,  
    Why fear and dream and death and birth  
    Cast on the daylight of this earth  
    Such gloom, why man has such a scope  
For love and hate, despondency and hope?

No voice from some sublimer world hath ever  
    To sage or poet these responses given:  
    Therefore the names of Demon, Ghost, and Heaven,  
Remain the records of their vain endeavour:  
Frail spells whose utter'd charm might not avail to sever,  
    From all we hear and all we see,  
    Doubt, chance and mutability.  
Thy light alone like mist o'er mountains driven,  
    Or music by the night-wind sent  
    Through strings of some still instrument,  
    Or moonlight on a midnight stream,  
Gives grace and truth to life's unquiet dream.

Love, Hope, and Self-esteem, like clouds depart  
    And come, for some uncertain moments lent.  
    Man were immortal and omnipotent,  
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within his heart.  
    Thou messenger of sympathies,  
    That wax and wane in lovers' eyes;  
Thou, that to human thought art nourishment,  
    Like darkness to a dying flame!

Depart not as thy shadow came,  
Depart not—lest the grave should be,  
Like life and fear, a dark reality.

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped  
Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,  
And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing  
Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.  
I call'd on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;  
I was not heard; I saw them not;  
When musing deeply on the lot  
Of life, at that sweet time when winds are wooing  
All vital things that wake to bring  
News of birds and blossoming,  
Sudden, thy shadow fell on me;  
I shriek'd, and clasp'd my hands in ecstasy!

I vow'd that I would dedicate my powers  
To thee and thine: have I not kept the vow?  
With beating heart and streaming eyes, even now  
I call the phantoms of a thousand hours  
Each from his voiceless grave: they have in vision'd bowers  
Of studious zeal or love's delight  
Outwatch'd with me the envious night:  
They know that never joy illum'd my brow  
Unlink'd with hope that thou wouldst free  
This world from its dark slavery,  
That thou, O awful LOVELINESS,  
Wouldst give whate'er these words cannot express.

The day becomes more solemn and serene  
When noon is past; there is a harmony  
In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,  
Which through the summer is not heard or seen,  
As if it could not be, as if it had not been!  
Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
Of nature on my passive youth  
Descended, to my onward life supply  
Its calm, to one who worships thee,  
And every form containing thee,  
Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind  
To fear himself, and love all human kind.

Source: Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45123/hymn-to-intellectual-beauty](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45123/hymn-to-intellectual-beauty). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

## 7. Black Earth

By Marianne Moore

Openly, yes,  
    With the naturalness  
    Of the hippopotamus or the alligator  
When it climbs out on the bank to experience the

Sun, I do these  
Things which I do, which please  
    No one but myself. Now I breathe and now I am sub-  
    Merged; the blemishes stand up and shout when the object

In view was a  
Renaissance; shall I say  
    The contrary? The sediment of the river which  
    Encrusts my joints, makes me very gray but I am used

To it, it may  
Remain there; do away  
    With it and I am myself done away with, for the  
    Patina of circumstance can but enrich what was

There to begin  
With. This elephant skin  
    Which I inhabit, fibered over like the shell of  
    The coco-nut, this piece of black glass through which no light

Can filter—cut  
Into checkers by rut  
    Upon rut of unpreventable experience—  
    It is a manual for the peanut-tongued and the

Hairy toed. Black  
But beautiful, my back  
    Is full of the history of power. Of power? What  
    Is powerful and what is not? My soul shall never

Be cut into  
By a wooden spear; through-  
    Out childhood to the present time, the unity of  
    Life and death has been expressed by the circumference

Described by my  
Trunk; nevertheless, I  
    Perceive feats of strength to be inexplicable after  
    All; and I am on my guard; external poise, it

Has its centre  
Well nurtured—we know  
    Where—in pride, but spiritual poise, it has its centre where?

My ears are sensitized to more than the sound of

The wind. I see  
And I hear, unlike the  
Wandlike body of which one hears so much, which was made  
To see and not to see; to hear and not to hear,

That tree trunk without  
Roots, accustomed to shout  
Its own thoughts to itself like a shell, maintained intact  
By who knows what strange pressure of the atmosphere; that

Spiritual  
Brother to the coral  
Plant, absorbed into which, the equable sapphire light  
Becomes a nebulous green. The I of each is to

The I of each,  
A kind of fretful speech  
Which sets a limit on itself; the elephant is?  
Black earth preceded by a tendril? It is to that

Phenomenon  
The above formation,  
Translucent like the atmosphere—a cortex merely—  
That on which darts cannot strike decisively the first

Time, a substance  
Needful as an instance  
Of the indestructibility of matter; it  
Has looked at the electricity and at the earth-

Quake and is still  
Here; the name means thick. Will  
Depth be depth, thick skin be thick, to one who can see no  
Beautiful element of unreason under it?

Source: Moore, Marianne. "Black Earth." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51565/black-earth](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51565/black-earth). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.

## 8. The Garden

### By Andrew Marvell

How vainly men themselves amaze  
To win the palm, the oak, or bays,  
And their uncessant labours see  
Crown'd from some single herb or tree,  
Whose short and narrow verged shade  
Does prudently their toils upbraid;  
While all flow'rs and all trees do close  
To weave the garlands of repose.

Fair Quiet, have I found thee here,  
And Innocence, thy sister dear!  
Mistaken long, I sought you then  
In busy companies of men;  
Your sacred plants, if here below,  
Only among the plants will grow.  
Society is all but rude,  
To this delicious solitude.

No white nor red was ever seen  
So am'rous as this lovely green.  
Fond lovers, cruel as their flame,  
Cut in these trees their mistress' name;  
Little, alas, they know or heed  
How far these beauties hers exceed!  
Fair trees! wheres'e'er your barks I wound,  
No name shall but your own be found.

When we have run our passion's heat,  
Love hither makes his best retreat.  
The gods, that mortal beauty chase,  
Still in a tree did end their race:  
Apollo hunted Daphne so,  
Only that she might laurel grow;  
And Pan did after Syrinx speed,  
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

What wond'rous life in this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head;  
The luscious clusters of the vine  
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;  
The nectarine and curious peach  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons as I pass,  
Ensnar'd with flow'rs, I fall on grass.

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less,  
Withdraws into its happiness;  
The mind, that ocean where each kind



Does straight its own resemblance find,  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other worlds, and other seas;  
Annihilating all that's made  
To a green thought in a green shade.

Here at the fountain's sliding foot,  
Or at some fruit tree's mossy root,  
Casting the body's vest aside,  
My soul into the boughs does glide;  
There like a bird it sits and sings,  
Then whets, and combs its silver wings;  
And, till prepar'd for longer flight,  
Waves in its plumes the various light.

Such was that happy garden-state,  
While man there walk'd without a mate;  
After a place so pure and sweet,  
What other help could yet be meet!  
But 'twas beyond a mortal's share  
To wander solitary there:  
Two paradises 'twere in one  
To live in paradise alone.

How well the skillful gard'ner drew  
Of flow'rs and herbs this dial new,  
Where from above the milder sun  
Does through a fragrant zodiac run;  
And as it works, th' industrious bee  
Computes its time as well as we.  
How could such sweet and wholesome hours  
Be reckon'd but with herbs and flow'rs!

Source: Marvell, Andrew. "The Garden." *Poetry Foundation*, 2021,  
[www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44682/the-garden-56d223dec2ced](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44682/the-garden-56d223dec2ced). Accessed 1 Feb. 2021.