

Venice

Water and marble and that silentness
Which is not broken by a wheel or hoof;
A city like a water-lily, less
Seen than reflected, palace wall and roof,
In the unfruitful waters motionless,
Without one living grass's green reproof;
A city without joy or weariness,
Itself beholding, from itself aloof.

Arthur Symons, 1903

Autumn

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

T. E. Hulme, 1908

Thaw

Over the land freckled with snow half-thawed
The speculating rooks at their nests cawed
And saw from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass
What we below could not see, Winter pass.

Edward Thomas, 1910s

The Jewel Stair's Grievance

The jewelled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

Li Bai, translated By Ezra Pound, 1915

NOTES: Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach.

The Attack

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

Siegfried Sassoon, 1918

Epitaphs of the War: Common Form

If any question why we died.
Tell them, because our fathers lied.

Rudyard Kipling, 1918

The Mosquito Knows

The mosquito knows full well, small as he is
he's a beast of prey.

But after all
he only takes his bellyful,
he doesn't put my blood in the bank.

D. H. Lawrence, 1929

Sanctuary

My land is bare of chattering folk;
The clouds are low along the ridges,
And sweet's the air with curly smoke
From all my burning bridges.

Dorothy Parker, 1931

Politics

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!

W. B. Yeats, 1938

Flying Crooked

The butterfly, a cabbage-white,
(His honest idiocy of flight)
Will never now, it is too late,
Master the art of flying straight,
Yet has – who knows so well as I? –
A just sense of how not to fly:
He lurches here and there by guess
And God and hope and hopelessness.
Even the aerobatic swift
Has not his flying-crooked gift.

Robert Graves, 1938

The Secret Sits

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

Robert Frost, 1942

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from the dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Randall Jarrell, 1945

Epigram

When I shall be without regret
And shall mortality forget,
When I shall die who lived for this,
I shall not miss the things I miss.
And you who notice where I lie
Ask not my name. It is not I.

J. V. Cunningham, 1947

Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load
Or does it just explode?

Langston Hughes, 1951

I may, I might, I must

If you will tell me why the fen
appears impassable, I then
will tell you why I think that I
can get across it if I try.

Marianne Moore, 1959

For Anne

With Annie gone,
Whose eyes to compare
To the summer sun

Not that I did compare,
But I do compare
Now that she's gone.

Leonard Cohen, 1961

In and Out

We've covered ground since that awkward day
When, thoughtlessly, a human mind
Decided to leave the apes behind,
Come pretty far, but who dare say
If far be forward or astray,
Or what we still might do in the way
Of patient building, impatient crime,
Given the sunlight, salt and time.

W. H. Auden, 1966

Pity us
By the sea
On the sands
So briefly

Samuel Menashe, 1982

Valentine

My heart has made its mind up
And I'm afraid it's you.
Whatever you've got lined up,
My heart has made its mind up
And if you can't be signed up
This year, next year will do.
My heart has made its mind up
And I'm afraid it's you.

Wendy Cope, 1992

Hope

What's the use
of something
as unstable
and diffuse as hope—
the almost-twin
of making-do,
the isotope
of going on:
what isn't in
the envelope
just before
it isn't:
the always tabled
righting of the present.

Kay Ryan, 1996

Once

The old rock-climber cries out in his sleep,
 Dreaming without enthusiasm
Of a great cliff immeasurably steep,
 Or of the sort of yawning chasm,
 Now far too deep,
That once, made safe by rashness, he could leap.

Richard Wilbur, 2000