

List of poems referred to in the resources

Coat

When it was bitter in New York City,
I would go out with my mother
past the icy buildings,

stay against her, just behind her
so she would stop the wind and snow,
and bury my face in her coat,

just there under her arm.
All winter, like her walk – in closet,
Its yellow light, I would walk into her,

Shake out my raw thoughts.
I didn't know who or what we were passing
or even if the city was still there,

the long radiant hairs against my face
like my grandmother's stole
with fox's head that lay on her breast,

me, clinging to my mortal mother,
our slow progress down that black, warm street.

Jane Duran

Old Photographs

On my desk is a photograph of you
taken by the woman who loved you then.

In some photos her shadow falls
in the foreground. In this one,
her body is not that far from yours.

Did you hold your head that way
because she loved it?

She is not invisible, not
my enemy,
nor even the past,
I think
I love the things she loved.

Of all your old photographs, I wanted
this one for its becoming. I think
you were starting
to turn your head a little,
your eyes looking slightly to the side.

Was this the beginning of leaving?

By Gabeba Baderoon

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Not Yet My Mother

Yesterday I found a photo
of you at seventeen,
holding a horse and smiling,
not yet my mother.

The tight riding hat hid your hair,
and your legs were still the long shins of a boy's,
you held the horse by the halter,
your hand a fist under its huge jaw.

The blown trees were still in the background
And the sky was grained by the old film stock,
But what caught me was your face,
which was mine.

And I thought, just for a second, that you were me.
But then I saw the woman's jacket,
nipped at the waist, the ballooned jhodpurs,
and of course the date, scratched in the corner.

All of which told me again,
that this was you at seventeen, holding a horse
and smiling, not yet my mother,
although I was clearly already your child.

Owen Sheers

Dawn Revisited

Imagine you wake up
with a second chance: The blue jay
hawks his pretty wares
and the oak still stands, spreading
glorious shade. If you don't look back,

the future never happens.
How good to rise in sunlight,
In the prodigal smell of biscuits –
eggs and sausage on the grill.
The whole sky is yours

to write on, blown open
to a blank page. Come on,
shake a leg! You'll never know
who's down there, frying those eggs,
if you don't get up and see.

Rita Dove

Yew Tree Guest House

The guest – house lounges
elderly ladies shrivel away
wearing bright beads and jumpers
to colour the waiting day
between breakfast and bed.

Grey windows whose beds and meals are made,
husbands tidied with the empty cupboards,
live in mortgaged time
disguising inconsequence
with shavings of surface talk, letters
to nieces, stitches dropped in the quick-knit jacket,
picked up for makeweight meaning.

Weekdays are patterned by meals –
sole chance for speculation –
will it be cabbage or peas; boiled fish or fried?
Dead Sunday is dedicated to roast beef –
knives and forks are grips upon existence.
This diversion lengthens the journey;
and since Mrs Porter ceased to come downstairs,
ceased altogether;
the ladies at the Yew Tree Guest House
draw closer to the table.

Phoebe Hesketh

Getting Older

The first surprise: I like it.
Whatever happens now, some things
that used to terrify have not:

I didn't die young, for instance. Or lose
my only love. My three children
never had to run away from anyone.

Don't tell me this gratitude is complacent.
We all approach the edge of the same blackness
which for me is silent.

Knowing as much sharpens
my delight in January freesia,
hot coffee, winter sunlight. So we say

as we lie close on some gently occasion:
every day won from such
darkness is a celebration.

Elaine Feinstein

In the Basement of the Goodwill Store

In musty light, in the thin brown air
of damp carpet, dolls' heads and rust,
beneath long rows of sharp footfalls
like nails in a lid, an old man stands
trying on glasses, lifting each pair
from the box like a glittering fish
and holding it up to the light
of a dirty bulb. Near him, a heap
of enamelled pans as white as skulls
looms in the catacomb shadows,
and old toilets with dry red throats
cough up bouquets of curtain rods

You've seen him somewhere before.
He's wearing the green leisure suit
you threw out with the garbage,
and the Christmas tie you hated,
and the ventilated wingtip shoes
you found in your father's closet
and wore as a joke. And glasses
which finally fit him, through which
he looks to see you looking back –
two mirrors which flash and glance –
are those through which one day
you too will look down over the years,
when you have grown old and thin
and no longer particular,
and the things you once thought
you were rid of forever
have taken you back in their arms.

Ted Kooser

I See You Dancing Father,

No sooner downstairs after the night's rest
And in the door
Then you started to dance a step
In the middle of the kitchen floor.

And as you danced
You whistled.
You made your own music
Always in tune with yourself.

Well, nearly always, anyway.
You're buried now
In Lislaughtin Abbey
And whenever I think of you

I go back beyond the old man
Mind and body broken
To find the unbroken man.
It is the moment before the dance begins,

Your lips are enjoying themselves
Whistling an air.
Whatever happens or cannot happen
In the time I have to spare
I see you dancing, father.

Brendan Kennelly

The Armada

Long long ago
when everything I was told was believable
and the little I knew was less limited than now,
I stretched belly down on the grass beside a pond
and to the far bank launched a child's armada

A broken fortress of twigs,
The paper-tissue sails of galleons,
the water-logged branches of submarines –
all came to ruin and were on flame
In that dusk-red pond.
And you, mother, stood behind me,
impatient to be going,
old at twenty-three, alone,
thin overcoat flapping.

How closely the past shadows us.
In a hospital a mile or so from that pond
I kneel beside your bed and, closing my eyes,
reach out across forty years to touch once more
that pond's cool surface,
and it is your cool skin I'm touching;
for as on a pond a child's paper boat
was blown out of reach
by the smallest gust of wind,
so too have you been blown out of reach
by the smallest whisper of death,
and a childhood memory is sharpened,
and the heart burns as that armada burnt,
long, long ago.

Brain Patten

Tramp

This mad prophet
gibbers mid-traffic,
wringing his hands
whilst mouthing at heaven.

No messages for us.
His conversation is simply
a passage through time.
He points and calls.

Our uneven stares dissuade
approach. We fear him, his
matted hair, patched coat,
grey look from sleeping out.

We mutter amongst ourselves
and hope he keeps away. No
place for him in our heaven,
there it's clean and empty.

Rupert M Loydell

Down and Out, Paddington Station

Weighted down by paper bags
And tired, string-tied coat
She shuffled among the tables
Inspecting the abandoned drinks
Then sat and dozed the timetable away
The faded hair told nothing
Above the lines of ingrained dirt
She had a little time
Before the midnight deadline
We did not know her destination –
Perhaps a doorway in the Euston Road
The cheerful flowers mocked her
Watched by unseeing
Sleeping the sleep of the unloved.

Christine Boothroyd

3 a.m. Feed

Soon we abandoned our "turns". I volunteered
Finding that, alone, the world hushed, I could
almost hear
It whispered – "This is your son."
In the crook of my arm, a perfect fit,
You were those words given weight.
Your fish mobiles made it seem we sat on the sea
bed,
Your bottle a little oxygen tank,
Your gentle sucking like a tick, tick, tick
Timing how long before we had to go up,
Face currents that tugged us apart – the fuss
Of want-to-hold relatives and, worse, the office
That kept me from your first step, first clear word.
Those moments were in the presence of
grandparents and mum,
Remembered in detail – "Ten past one,
Blur on the radio; he went from the armchair
To the coffee table." Still, for me,
Those feeds have equal clarity,
Last week coming so strongly to mind –
Caught T-shirted in a summer storm,
My forearm felt drops as large and warm
As the one I'd splash there to test the temperature
That white drop would sometimes dribble
Down to my palm – a pearl.

Steven Blyth

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Carpe Diem

From my study window
I see you
below in the garden, a hand
here pruning
or leaning across to snip
a wayward shoot;

a daub of powder-blue in a
profusion of green,
then next moment, you are
no longer there –
only to reappear, this time
perfectly framed

in dappling sunlight, with
an armful of ivy
you've trimmed, topped by
hyacinth blooms,
fragrant survivors of last
night's frost.

And my heart misses a beat
at love for you,
knowing a time will come
when you are
no longer there, nor I here
to watch you

on a day of such simplicity.
Meantime let us
make sure we clasp each
shared moment
in cupped hands, like water
we dare not spill.

Stewart Corn

Night Feed

This is dawn
Believe me
This is your season, little daughter.
The moment daisies open,
The hour mercurial rainwater
Makes a mirror for sparrows.
It's time we drowned our sorrows.

I tiptoe in.
I lift you up
Wriggling
In your rosy, zippered sleeper.
Yes, this is the hour
For the early bird and me
When finder is keeper.

I crook the bottle.
How you suckle!
This is the best I can be,
Housewife
To this nursery
Where you hold on,
Dear life.

A silt of milk.
The last suck
And now your eyes are open,
Birth – coloured and offended.
Earth wakes.
You go back to sleep.
The feed is ended.

Worms turn.
Stars go in.
Even the moon is losing face.
Poplars stilt for dawn.
And we begin
The long fall from grace.
I tuck you in.

Eavan Bland

A Child's Sleep

I stood at the edge of my child's sleep
hearing her breathe;
although I could not enter there,
I could not leave.

Her sleep was a small wood,
perfumed with flowers;
dark, peaceful, sacred,
acred in hours.

And she was the spirit that lives
in the heart of such woods;
without time, without history,
wordlessly good.

I spoke her name,
pebble dropped in the still night
and saw her stir, open both palms
cupping their soft light.

Then went to the window.
The greater dark
outside the room
gazed back, maternal, wise,
with its face of moon.

Carol Ann Duffy

First Love

I knew it had to come. I couldn't bear
it then; can't take it now. I'll make amends.
I'm willing to agree, now. So – be fair,
There's no need to split up. We'll just be friends.

Like you suggested. Not see quite so much
of each other. Please! I agree. You're right.
I made too much of what we had. Been such
a fool. I'll take the blame. We'll start tonight
-The New Improved Regime. We'll both be free

to do just as we want – the adult way.
I'll do just as you want me to. You'll see.
I'm willing to do anything you say.
I promise. I won't make a scene. Won't cry.
If you'll do just one thing. Don't say goodbye.

Mick Gowar

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Years Ago

It was what we did not do that I remember,
places with no markers left by us,
All of a summer, meeting every day,
A memorable summer of hot days,
Day after day of them, evening after evening.
Sometimes we would laze

Upon the river-bank, just touching hands
Or stroking one another's arms with grasses.
Swans floated by seeming to assert
Their dignity. But we too had our own
Decorum in the small – change of first love.

Nothing was elegiac or nostalgic,
We threw time in the river as we threw
Breadcrumbs to an inquisitive duck, and so
Day entered evening with a sweeping gesture,
Idly we talked of food and where to go.

This is the love that I knew long ago.
Before possession, passion, and betrayal.

Elizabeth Jennings.

Rejection

Rejection is orange
Not, as one might think,
Grey and nondescript.
It is the vivid orange of
A council worker's jacket.
A coat of shame that says
'he doesn't want you.'

Rejection tastes like ashes
Acrid, bitter.
It sounds
Like the whisper of voices
Behind my back.
'He didn't want her.
He dumped her.'
It feels
Like the scraping of fingernails
On a blackboard,
Not ache or stab of pain
But like having a layer of skin missing.
Rejection looks like – me,
I suppose.

Slightly leftover
Like the last, curled sandwich
When all the guests
Have gone.

Jenny Sullivan