

POEMS
FROM NEW WRITING

1936 - 1946

With a Foreword by
JOHN LEHMANN



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1946

FOREWORD

THE first volume of *New Writing* was published in the Spring of 1936. It contained twenty contributions, and of those only two were poetry: a translation of Boris Pasternak's long poem 1905 by Alec Brown, and four poems by Stephen Spender, three of them translations from Hoelderlin.

One original poem in the first volume: the second contained none at all. But in the third volume W. H. Auden's *Lay Your Sleeping Head My Love* made its first appearance, together with original poems by Stephen Spender, Roy Fuller, Clifford Dymont, and poems translated from the Spanish and Polish. Ever since that time poetry played an important part in the volumes of *New Writing* as they came out every six months, and, later, in the more frequent issues of *Penguin New Writing*, which combined poems originally published in the big volumes with new poems. If anything the number of pages devoted to poetry increased during the war years: this was not, I think, due to deliberate policy, but to the fact that, at any rate among the authors who came within my scope, a far greater volume of poetry was being written than before.

The present anthology is an attempt to collect the best and most interesting poems which appeared under my editorship during those ten years,¹ whether in *New Writing*, *Folios of New Writing*, *New Writing & Daylight*, or *The Penguin New Writing*. I will not claim for it that every young poet of significance writing during the period is represented, for I am well aware that one or two names are absent which no one would leave out who was counting the stars of our time; but I do claim that it contains—and I was agreeably surprised to discover it as I made the choice—a high proportion of the outstanding poems that were written between the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and the end of the European War, perhaps higher than any other single editor can proudly stick as feathers in his cap.

The Spanish War is a gloomy milestone for creative writers, marking as it does the second descent of the twentieth century

¹I have not included any poem which appeared later than *New Writing & Daylight* or *Penguin New Writing* 26.

into the violence of international anarchy, a descent made more destructive for them by the confusion of warring ideologies with warring empires. Rare and lucky were the poets who could find the calm and leisure in the midst of such events for continuous poetic creation at the deepest level; and yet these events, by the passions they excited and the drama they manifested, involving the oldest beliefs and allegiances and spiritual hungers of our civilization, were material that most young poets would find it difficult to refuse in any age. Our age, however, has been distinguished above all other ages by the tendency, in all fields of activity, to exploit whatever comes to hand as immediately and intensively as possible; and poetry has not escaped the workings of this impulse, though prose fiction bears the deeper trace. An anthology could, of course, be made from the poetry of the last ten years in which topical disturbances were only present in the most indirect and remote way, and its quality would be high; it would nevertheless exclude a great deal of equally high quality—I am not speaking of the abundant poetry which is little more than verse-journalism—which has had a more vivid meaning for the men and women who have lived and died among the wars and rumours of wars. It is this latter poetry in particular (though never exclusively), which *New Writing*, from the time I founded it, set itself to provide a medium for; and that is why I believe that this anthology may turn out to be a peculiarly interesting poetic mirror of the history of our time. With this in mind I have kept the order of poems as far as possible to the chronological order of publication.

The poems in the first volume of *New Writing* were few, but they managed to be typical of what was to come in more than this emphasis on contemporary awareness: they included translations from other European literatures, and one of them was an unusually long poem. *New Writing* has consistently opened its pages to translations from French, Greek, Czech, Polish, Spanish and other languages; and, equally consistently, to poems of a length rarely acceptable to the average weekly or monthly. The space it afforded as a book-magazine made this possible, and it eventually became a pioneer of the long poem—and the translated long poem—for many other book-magazines which followed

it; so that one can say that a poet who runs to length has today as good a chance of being printed in periodicals as a poet who expresses himself more naturally in short lyrics.

In more than one way, therefore,—though for various reasons I have been able to include only a few of the longest poems—I hope that this anthology will have a flavour and *raison d'être* distinct from that of the many other anthologies which it is bound in some degree to overlap; quite apart from standing for judgment as a record of one man's taste and the encouragement he endeavoured to give to the making of poetry—to the building of dykes during the ten years of flood weather.

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JOHN LEHMANN.

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THE SAD STANDARDS

Alas for the sad standards

In the eyes of the old masters
Sprouting through glaze of their pictures!

For what we stare at through glass
Opens on to our running time :
As nature spilled before the summer mansion
Pours through windows in on our dimension :

And the propellor's rigid transparent flicker
To airman over continental ranges
Between him and the towns and river
Spells dynamics of this rotating
Age of invention, too rapid for sight.

Varnish over paint and dust across glass :
Stare back, remote, the static drum ;
The locked ripeness of the centaur's feast ;
The blowing flags, frozen stiff
In a cracked fog, and the facing
Reproach of Rembrandt's self-portrait.

Alas for the sad standards
In the eyes of freshly dead young
Sprawled in the mud of battle.
Stare back, stare back, with dust over glazed
Eyes, their gaze at partridges,
Their dreams of girls, and their collected
Faith in home, wound up like a little watch.

To ram them outside time, violence
Of wills that ride the cresting day
Struck them with lead so swift

To cheer the abysmal gulfs, the crests that lift not
To any land in sight ?
How shall the sea-wolf, who lives from surge to surge, chart
Current and reef aright ?

Always our time's ghost-guise of impermanence
Daunts me : whoever I meet,
Wherever I stand, a shade of parting lengthens
And laps around my feet.
But now, the heart Sunderings, the real migrations—
Millions fated to flock
Down weeping roads to mere oblivion—strike me
Dumb as a rooted rock.

I watch when searchlights set the low cloud smoking
Like acid on metal : I start
At sirens, sweat to feel a whole town wince
And thump, a terrified heart,
Under the bomb-strokes. These, to look back on, are
A few hours' unreprieve :
But the roofless old, the child beneath the débris—
How can I speak for those ?

Busy the preachers, the politicians weaving
Volatile charms around
This ordeal, conjuring a harvest that shall spring from
Our heart's all-harrowed ground.
I, who chose to be caged with the devouring
Present, must hold its eye
Where blaze ten thousand farms and fields unharvested,
And hearts, steel-broken, die.

Yet words there must be, wept on the cratered present,
To gleam beyond it :
Never was cup so mortal but poets with mild
Everlastings have crowned it.
See wavelets and wind-blown shadows of leaves on a stream

How they ripple together,
As life and death intermarried—you cannot tell
One from another.

Our words like poppies love the maturing field,
But form no harvest :
May lighten the innocent's pang, or paint the dreams
Where guilt is unharnessed.
Dark over all, absolving all is hung
Death's vaulted patience :
Words are to set man's joy and suffering there
In constellations.

We speak of what we know, but what we have spoken
Truly we know not—
Whether our good may tarnish, our grief to far
Centuries glow not.
The Cause shales off, the Humankind stands forth
A mightier presence,
Flooded by dawn's pale courage, rapt in eve's
Rich acquiescence.

C. Day Lewis.

CHRYSOTHEMIS

I CANNOT follow them into their world of death,
Or their hunted world of life, though through the house,
Death and the hunted bird sing at every nightfall.
I am Chrysothemis : I sailed with dipping sails,
Suffered the winds I would not strive against,
Entered the whirlpools and was flung outside them,
Survived the murders, triumphs and revenges,
Survived ; and remain in a falling, decaying mansion,
A house detested and dark in the setting sun,
The furniture covered with sheets, the gardens empty,

A brother and a sister long departed,
A railing mother gone.
It is my house now. I have set myself to protect,
Against the demons that linger inside our walls,
Their saddened, quiet children of darkness and shame ;
They lie on inherited beds in their heavy slumbers,
Their faces relaxed to nocturnal innocence.
I will protect them in the decaying palace.

In the dying sun, through slots in the shuttered windows,
I can see the hanging gardens carved on our mountain
Above and below us, terraces, groves and arbours,
The careful rise of the trees to meet the heavens,
The deliberate riot of the wilderness,
The silent arch through which my brother returned,
And again returned.

In the long broad days of summer,
On the great hill the house lay, lost and absorbed and dreaming,
The gardens glittered under the sweeping sun,
The inmates kept to their rooms, and hope
Rose in the silence.

And indeed

It seemed the agony must die. But then
The house would seem to sigh, and then again,
A sigh and another silence. Through the slotted shutters
I would see them there, my mother and my sister
Wandering and meeting in the garden's quiet
(And I moved from room to room to see them better).
There seemed a truce between them, as if they had
Called off their troops in order to bury their dead.
I could not hear my sister speak ; but clearly,
She spoke with calm and patience, and my mother gave
The answer designed to please, wistful and eager ;
And her words would be quietly taken, twisted and turned,
Ropes, that would loose the rivers to flood again ;
The fragile dams would burst, indeed constructed
Only for breaking down.

This was the yawn of time while a murder
Awaited another murder. I did not see
My father's murder, but I see it now always around me,
And I see it shapeless : as when we are sometimes told
Of the heroes who walk out into the snow and blizzard
To spare their comrades care, we always see
A white direction in which the figure goes,
And a vague ravine in which he stumbles and falls.
My father rises thus from a bath of blood,
Groping from table to chair in a dusky room
Through doorways into darkening corridors,
Falling at last in the howling vestibule.

In the years that followed, the winds of time swept round
The anniversaries of the act ; and they
Were shouted down : my mother prepared for them
Music and dance, and called them celebrations.
They did not, fever-laden, creep on her unaware.
But did the nights not turn on her ? Did she not
Dream music in the false-dawn faltering, phrases
Repeating endlessly, a figure of the dance
Halting and beckoning ?

It is my house now, decaying but never dying,
The soul's museum, preserving and embalming
The shuttered rooms, the amulets, the pictures,
The doorways waiting for perennial surprises,
The children sleeping under the heat of summer,
And lastly the great bronze doors of the bridal chamber,
Huge and unspeaking, not to be pressed and opened,
Not to be lingered near, then or thereafter,
Not to be pounded upon by desolate fists,
Mine least of all.

I sailed with dipping sails.

I was not guilty of anybody's blood.
I will protect them in the decaying house.

With this resolve, concluded like a prayer,
From the eyes of the window gently stealing away,

As in a ritual I wipe the dust from the mirror
And look through the dark at the dim reflection before me.
The lips draw back from the mouth,
The night draws back from the years,
And there is the family smile in the quivering room.

The sun has gone, and the hunted bird demands:
*'Can the liar guard the truth, the deceiver seek it,
The murderer preserve, the harlot chaste, or the guilty
Shelter the innocent? And shall you protect?'*

Henry Reed.

BATHERS

THEY flutter out of white, and run
through the electric wind to bathe,
giggling like rivers for the fun
of smacking mud in the toes, of lithe
and sliding bodies like their own
—sharp rushes, good to battle with.

The child knows all delight to be
naked and queer as his own name,
foreign as being loved: but he
feels as a kind of coming home
the flags that slap his plunging knee,
and the cold stocking of the stream.

Coiling in wombs of water, bent
backwards upon the sheets of air,
his wand of sexless body lent
to all that was or casts before,
he strips to either element
a foetus or a ravisher.

So gladly virgin rivers rush
down to their amniotic seas,
children of cold and glittering flesh
that promise harvest as they pass
panes of tiny fertile fish
in the fast pale of bolsterous thighs.

Terence Tiller.

BROTHER FIRE

WHEN our brother Fire was having his dog's day
Jumping the London streets with millions of tin cans
Clanking at his tail, we heard some shadow say
'Give the dog a bone'—and so we gave him ours;
Night after night we watched him slaver and crunch away
The beams of human life, the tops of topless towers.

Which gluttony of his for us was Lenten fare
Who mother-naked, suckled with sparks, were chill
Though dandled on a grid of sizzling air
Striped like a convict—black, yellow and red;
Thus were we weaned to knowledge of the Will
That wills the natural world but wills us dead.

O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire,
O enemy and image of ourselves,
Did we not on those mornings after the All Clear,
When you were looting shops in elemental joy
And singing as you swarmed up city block and spire,
Echo your thoughts in ours? 'Destroy! Destroy!'

Louis MacNeice.

THE WALL

THE place where our two gardens meet
Is undivided by a street,
And mingled flower and weed caress
And fill our double wilderness,
Among whose riot undismayed
And unreprieved, we idly played,
While, unaccompanied by fears,
The months extended into years,
Till we went down one day in June
To pass the usual afternoon
And there discovered, shoulder-tall,
Rise in the wilderness a wall :
The wall which put us out of reach
And into silence split our speech.
We knew, and we had always known
That some dark, unseen hand of stone
Hovered across our days of ease,
And strummed its tunes upon the breeze.
It had not tried us overmuch,
But here it was, for us to touch.

The wilderness is still as wild,
And separately unreconciled
The tangled thickets play and sprawl
Beneath the shadows of our wall,
And the wall varies with the flowers
And has its seasons and its hours.
Look at its features wintrily
Frozen to transparency ;
Through it an icy music swells
And a brittle, brilliant chime of bells :
Would you conjecture that, in Spring,
We lean upon it, talk and sing,
Or climb upon it, and play chess
Upon its summer silentness ?

One certain thing alone we know :
Silence or song, it does not go.
A habit now to wake with day
And watch it catch the sun's first ray,
Or terrorised to scramble through
The depths of night to prove it true.

We need not doubt, for such a wall
Is based in death, and does not fall.

Henry Reed.

ELEGY

TREE of the hillside, Apple tree,
high in the morning
drop your red apples.

The shadows of birds and their small bright mouths
leap over woods that part the bending rivers—
over the creeping ridges, valley to valley
the spires of cockcrow and the cold bell answer
far to the blind sea, to the drowned ledges ;
spanned by the sky's wide beaches. Or fine spires
the gold birds flash swinging above the copses
and out of farms under the intricate sky
the tall necks yell incessant at the morning—

among your leaves of the fountain
a hundred reddening globes, the faces of children
tree of the chalk hill, apple tree
roll your red apples to the parishes ;
down to wet valleys, by streams, hung with the leaves' old faces.