

# 1. Church Going

By Philip Larkin

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,

Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new –  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort or other will go on

In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt  
So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation – marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these – for which was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

<https://thepoetryhour.com/poems/church-going/>

## 2. Fern Hill

By Dylan Thomas

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,  
    The night above the dingle starry,  
        Time let me hail and climb  
    Golden in the heydays of his eyes,  
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
    Trail with daisies and barley  
    Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns  
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,  
    In the sun that is young once only,  
        Time let me play and be  
    Golden in the mercy of his means,  
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves  
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,  
    And the sabbath rang slowly  
    In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay  
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air  
    And playing, lovely and watery  
        And fire green as grass.  
    And nightly under the simple stars  
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,  
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars  
    Flying with the ricks, and the horses  
        Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white  
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all  
    Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
        The sky gathered again  
    And the sun grew round that very day.

So it must have been after the birth of the simple light  
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm  
    Out of the whinnying green stable  
        On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house  
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,  
    In the sun born over and over,  
        I ran my heedless ways,  
    My wishes raced through the house high hay  
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows  
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs  
    Before the children green and golden  
        Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me  
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,  
    In the moon that is always rising,  
        Nor that riding to sleep  
    I should hear him fly with the high fields  
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.  
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,  
    Time held me green and dying  
        Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

<https://allpoetry.com/poem/16358291-Fern-Hill-by-Dylan-Thomas-adult>

### 3. Aboriginal Landscape

By Louise Glück

You're stepping on your father, my mother said,  
and indeed I was standing exactly in the center  
of a bed of grass, mown so neatly it could have been  
my father's grave, although there was no stone saying so.

You're stepping on your father, she repeated,  
louder this time, which began to be strange to me,  
since she was dead herself; even the doctor had admitted it.

I moved slightly to the side, to where  
my father ended and my mother began.

The cemetery was silent. Wind blew through the trees;  
I could hear, very faintly, sounds of weeping several rows away,  
and beyond that, a dog wailing.

At length these sounds abated. It crossed my mind  
I had no memory of being driven here,  
to what now seemed a cemetery, though it could have been  
a cemetery in my mind only; perhaps it was a park, or if not a park,  
a garden or bower, perfumed, I now realized, with the scent of roses —  
douceur de vivre filling the air, the sweetness of living,  
as the saying goes. At some point,

it occurred to me I was alone.  
Where had the others gone,  
my cousins and sister, Caitlin and Abigail?

By now the light was fading. Where was the car  
waiting to take us home?

I then began seeking for some alternative. I felt  
an impatience growing in me, approaching, I would say, anxiety.  
Finally, in the distance, I made out a small train,  
stopped, it seemed, behind some foliage, the conductor

lingering against a doorframe, smoking a cigarette.

Do not forget me, I cried, running now  
over many plots, many mothers and fathers —

Do not forget me, I cried, when at last I reached him.  
Madam, he said, pointing to the tracks,  
surely you realize this is the end, the tracks do not go further.  
His words were harsh, and yet his eyes were kind;  
this encouraged me to press my case harder.  
But they go back, I said, and I remarked  
their sturdiness, as though they had many such returns ahead of them.

You know, he said, our work is difficult: we confront  
much sorrow and disappointment.  
He gazed at me with increasing frankness.  
I was like you once, he added, in love with turbulence.

Now I spoke as to an old friend:  
What of you, I said, since he was free to leave,  
have you no wish to go home,  
to see the city again?

This is my home, he said.  
The city—the city is where I disappear.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/56626/aboriginal-landscape>

#### 4. A Litany for Survival By Audre Lorde

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures  
like bread in our children's mouths  
so their dreams will not reflect  
the death of ours;

For those of us  
who were imprinted with fear  
like a faint line in the center of our foreheads  
learning to be afraid with our mother's milk  
for by this weapon  
this illusion of some safety to be found  
the heavy-footed hoped to silence us  
For all of us  
this instant and this triumph  
We were never meant to survive.

And when the sun rises we are afraid  
it might not remain  
when the sun sets we are afraid  
it might not rise in the morning  
when our stomachs are full we are afraid  
of indigestion  
when our stomachs are empty we are afraid  
we may never eat again  
when we are loved we are afraid

love will vanish  
when we are alone we are afraid  
love will never return  
and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147275/a-litany-for-survival>

## 5. When the World as We Knew It Ended

By Joy Harjo

We were dreaming on an occupied island at the farthest edge  
of a trembling nation when it went down.

Two towers rose up from the east island of commerce and touched  
the sky. Men walked on the moon. Oil was sucked dry  
by two brothers. Then it went down. Swallowed  
by a fire dragon, by oil and fear.  
Eaten whole.

It was coming.

We had been watching since the eve of the missionaries in their  
long and solemn clothes, to see what would happen.

We saw it  
from the kitchen window over the sink  
as we made coffee, cooked rice and  
potatoes, enough for an army.

We saw it all, as we changed diapers and fed  
the babies. We saw it,  
through the branches  
of the knowledgeable tree  
through the snags of stars, through  
the sun and storms from our knees  
as we bathed and washed  
the floors.

The conference of the birds warned us, as they flew over  
destroyers in the harbor, parked there since the first takeover.  
It was by their song and talk we knew when to rise  
when to look out the window  
to the commotion going on—  
the magnetic field thrown off by grief.

We heard it.

The racket in every corner of the world. As  
the hunger for war rose up in those who would steal to be president  
to be king or emperor, to own the trees, stones, and everything  
else that moved about the earth, inside the earth  
and above it.

We knew it was coming, tasted the winds who gathered intelligence  
from each leaf and flower, from every mountain, sea  
and desert, from every prayer and song all over this tiny universe  
floating in the skies of infinite  
being.

And then it was over, this world we had grown to love  
for its sweet grasses, for the many-colored horses  
and fishes, for the shimmering possibilities  
while dreaming.

But then there were the seeds to plant and the babies  
who needed milk and comforting, and someone  
picked up a guitar or ukulele from the rubble  
and began to sing about the light flutter  
the kick beneath the skin of the earth  
we felt there, beneath us

a warm animal  
a song being born between the legs of her;  
a poem.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49619/when-the-world-as-we-knew-it-ended>

## 6. The Afterlife

By Billy Collins

While you are preparing for sleep, brushing your teeth,  
or riffling through a magazine in bed,  
the dead of the day are setting out on their journey.

They're moving off in all imaginable directions,  
each according to his own private belief,  
and this is the secret that silent Lazarus would not reveal:  
that everyone is right, as it turns out.  
you go to the place you always thought you would go,  
The place you kept lit in an alcove in your head.

Some are being shot into a funnel of flashing colors  
into a zone of light, white as a January sun.  
Others are standing naked before a forbidding judge who sits  
with a golden ladder on one side, a coal chute on the other.

Some have already joined the celestial choir  
and are singing as if they have been doing this forever,  
while the less inventive find themselves stuck  
in a big air conditioned room full of food and chorus girls.

Some are approaching the apartment of the female God,  
a woman in her forties with short wiry hair  
and glasses hanging from her neck by a string.  
With one eye she regards the dead through a hole in her door.

There are those who are squeezing into the bodies  
of animals—eagles and leopards—and one trying on  
the skin of a monkey like a tight suit,  
ready to begin another life in a more simple key,

while others float off into some benign vagueness,  
little units of energy heading for the ultimate elsewhere.

There are even a few classicists being led to an underworld

by a mythological creature with a beard and hooves.  
He will bring them to the mouth of the furious cave  
guarded over by Edith Hamilton and her three-headed dog.

The rest just lie on their backs in their coffins  
wishing they could return so they could learn Italian  
or see the pyramids, or play some golf in a light rain.  
They wish they could wake in the morning like you  
and stand at a window examining the winter trees,  
every branch traced with the ghost writing of snow.

<https://wordsoftheyear.com/2016/04/30/the-afterlife-by-billy-collins/>