

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 Thomas Dylan

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://wordsforyear.com/2016/04/30/the-afterlife-by-billy-collins/>