

Classic Poetry Series

Bertolt Brecht

- poems -

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Alabama Song

Show me the way to the next whisky bar
Oh, don't ask why, oh, don't ask why
Show me the way to the next whisky bar
Oh, don't ask why, oh, don't ask why
For if we don't find the next whisky bar
I tell you we must die
I tell you we must die
I tell you
I tell you
I tell you we must die

Oh, moon of Alabama
We now must say say good-bye
We've lost our good old mamma
And must have whisky
Oh, you know why.

Show me the way to the next pretty girl
Oh, don't ask why, oh, don't ask why
Show me the way to the next pretty girl
Oh don't ask why, oh, don't ask why
For if we don't find the next pretty girl
I tell you we must die
I tell you we must die
I tell you
I tell you
I tell you we must die

Oh, moon of Alabama
We now must say good-bye
We've lost our good old mamma
And must have a girl
Oh, you know why.

Show me the way to the next little dollar
Oh, don't ask why, oh, don't ask why
Show me the way to the next little dollar
Oh, don't ask why, oh, don't ask why
For if we don't find the next little dollar
I tell you we must die
I tell you we must die
I tell you
I tell you
I tell you we must die

Oh, moon of Alabama
We now must say good-bye
We've lost our good old mamma
And must have dollars
Oh, you know why.

Bertolt Brecht

Contemplating Hell

Contemplating Hell, as I once heard it,
My brother Shelley found it to be a place
Much like the city of London. I,
Who do not live in London, but in Los Angeles,
Find, contemplating Hell, that it
Must be even more like Los Angeles.

Also in Hell,
I do not doubt it, there exist these opulent gardens
With flowers as large as trees, wilting, of course,
Very quickly, if they are not watered with very expensive water. And fruit markets
With great leaps of fruit, which nonetheless

Possess neither scent nor taste. And endless trains of autos,
Lighter than their own shadows, swifter than
Foolish thoughts, shimmering vehicles, in which
Rosy people, coming from nowhere, go nowhere.
And houses, designed for happiness, standing empty,
Even when inhabited.

Even the houses in Hell are not all ugly.
But concern about being thrown into the street
Consumes the inhabitants of the villas no less
Than the inhabitants of the barracks.

Bertolt Brecht

From A German War Primer

AMONGST THE HIGHLY PLACED
It is considered low to talk about food.
The fact is: they have
Already eaten.

The lowly must leave this earth
Without having tasted
Any good meat.

For wondering where they come from and
Where they are going
The fine evenings find them
Too exhausted.

They have not yet seen
The mountains and the great sea
When their time is already up.

If the lowly do not
Think about what's low
They will never rise.

THE BREAD OF THE HUNGRY HAS
ALL BEEN EATEN
Meat has become unknown. Useless
The pouring out of the people's sweat.
The laurel groves have been
Lopped down.
From the chimneys of the arms factories
Rises smoke.

THE HOUSE-PAINTER SPEAKS OF
GREAT TIMES TO COME
The forests still grow.
The fields still bear
The cities still stand.
The people still breathe.

ON THE CALENDAR THE DAY IS NOT
YET SHOWN
Every month, every day
Lies open still. One of those days
Is going to be marked with a cross.

THE WORKERS CRY OUT FOR BREAD
The merchants cry out for markets.
The unemployed were hungry. The employed
Are hungry now.
The hands that lay folded are busy again.
They are making shells.

THOSE WHO TAKE THE MEAT FROM THE TABLE

Teach contentment.
Those for whom the contribution is destined
Demand sacrifice.
Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry
Of wonderful times to come.
Those who lead the country into the abyss
Call ruling too difficult
For ordinary men.

WHEN THE LEADERS SPEAK OF PEACE
The common folk know
That war is coming.
When the leaders curse war
The mobilization order is already written out.

THOSE AT THE TOP SAY: PEACE
AND WAR
Are of different substance.
But their peace and their war
Are like wind and storm.

War grows from their peace
Like son from his mother
He bears
Her frightful features.

Their war kills
Whatever their peace
Has left over.

ON THE WALL WAS CHALKED:
They want war.
The man who wrote it
Has already fallen.

THOSE AT THE TOP SAY:
This way to glory.
Those down below say:
This way to the grave.

THE WAR WHICH IS COMING
Is not the first one. There were
Other wars before it.
When the last one came to an end
There were conquerors and conquered.
Among the conquered the common people
Starved. Among the conquerors
The common people starved too.

THOSE AT THE TOP SAY COMRADESHIP
Reigns in the army.
The truth of this is seen

In the cookhouse.
In their hearts should be
The selfsame courage. But
On their plates
Are two kinds of rations.

WHEN IT COMES TO MARCHING MANY DO NOT
KNOW
That their enemy is marching at their head.
The voice which gives them their orders
Is their enemy's voice and
The man who speaks of the enemy
Is the enemy himself.

IT IS NIGHT
The married couples
Lie in their beds. The young women
Will bear orphans.

GENERAL, YOUR TANK IS A POWERFUL VEHICLE
It smashes down forests and crushes a hundred men.
But it has one defect:
It needs a driver.

General, your bomber is powerful.
It flies faster than a storm and carries more than an elephant.
But it has one defect:
It needs a mechanic.

General, man is very useful.
He can fly and he can kill.
But he has one defect:
He can think.

Bertolt Brecht

How Fortunate the Man with None

<i>From the play "Mother Courage"</i>

You saw sagacious Solomon
You know what came of him,
To him complexities seemed plain.
He cursed the hour that gave birth to him
And saw that everything was vain.
How great and wise was Solomon.
The world however did not wait
But soon observed what followed on.
It's wisdom that had brought him to this state.
How fortunate the man with none.

You saw courageous Caesar next
You know what he became.
They deified him in his life
Then had him murdered just the same.
And as they raised the fatal knife
How loud he cried: you too my son!
The world however did not wait
But soon observed what followed on.
It's courage that had brought him to that state.
How fortunate the man with none.

You heard of honest Socrates
The man who never lied:
They weren't so grateful as you'd think
Instead the rulers fixed to have him tried
And handed him the poisoned drink.
How honest was the people's noble son.
The world however did not wait
But soon observed what followed on.
It's honesty that brought him to that state.
How fortunate the man with none.

Here you can see respectable folk
Keeping to God's own laws.
So far he hasn't taken heed.
You who sit safe and warm indoors
Help to relieve our bitter need.
How virtuously we had begun.
The world however did not wait
But soon observed what followed on.
It's fear of god that brought us to that state.
How fortunate the man with none.

Bertolt Brecht

I Never Loved You More

I never loved you more, ma soeur
Than as I walked away from you that evening.
The forest swallowed me, the blue forest, ma soeur
The blue forest and above it pale stars in the west.

I did not laugh, not one little bit, ma soeur
As I playfully walked towards a dark fate –
While the faces behind me
Slowly paled in the evening of the blue forest.

Everything was grand that one night, ma soeur
Never thereafter and never before –
I admit it: I was left with nothing but the big birds
And their hungry cries in the dark evening sky.

Bertolt Brecht

I Want To Go With The One I Love

I want to go with the one I love.
I do not want to calculate the cost.
I do not want to think about whether it's good.
I do not want to know whether he loves me.
I want to go with whom I love.

Bertolt Brecht

I want to go with the one I love...

[Original]

Ich will mit dem gehen, den ich liebe.
Ich will nicht ausrechnen, was es kostet.
Ich will nicht nachdenken, ob es gut ist.
Ich will nicht wissen, ob er mich liebt.
Ich will mit ihm gehen, den ich liebe.

[Translation]

I want to go with the one I love.
I do not want to calculate the cost.
I do not want to think about whether it's good.
I do not want to know whether he loves me.
I want to go with whom I love.

Bertolt Brecht

Ich habe dich nie je so geliebt...

[Original]

Ich habe dich nie je so geliebt, ma soeur
Als wie ich fortging von dir in jenem Abendrot.
Der Wald schluckte mich, der blaue Wald, ma soeur
Über dem immer schon die bleichen Gestirne im Westen standen.

Ich lachte kein klein wenig, gar nicht, ma soeur
Der ich spielend dunklem Schicksal entgegenging --
Während schon die Gesichter hinter mir
Langsam im Abend des blauen Walds verblaßten.

Alles war schön an diesem einzigen Abend, ma soeur
Nachher nie wieder und nie zuvor --
Freilich: mir blieben nur mehr die großen Vögel
Die abends im dunklen Himmel Hunger haben.

[Translation]

I never loved you more, ma soeur
Than as I walked away from you that evening.
The forest swallowed me, the blue forest, ma soeur
The blue forest and above it pale stars in the west.

I did not laugh, not one little bit, ma soeur
As I playfully walked towards a dark fate --
While the faces behind me
Slowly paled in the evening of the blue forest.

Everything was grand that one night, ma soeur
Never thereafter and never before --
I admit it: I was left with nothing but the big birds
And their hungry cries in the dark evening sky.

Bertolt Brecht

I'm not saying anything against Alexander

Timur, I hear, took the trouble to conquer the earth.
I don't understand him.
With a bit of hard liquor you can forget the earth.

I'm not saying anything against Alexander,
Only I have seen people who were remarkable,
Highly deserving of your admiration
For the fact that they were alive at all.

Great men generate too much sweat.
In all of this I see just a proof that
They couldn't stand being on their own
And smoking and drinking and the like.
And they must be too mean-spirited to get
Contentment from sitting by a woman.

Bertolt Brecht

Mack the Knife

Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear
And he shows them pearly white.
Just a jack knife has Macheath, dear
And he keeps it out of sight.

When the shark bites with his teeth, dear
Scarlet billows start to spread.
Fancy gloves, though, wears Macheath, dear
So there's not a trace of red.

On the side-walk Sunday morning
Lies a body oozing life;
Someone's sneaking 'round the corner.
Is that someone Mack the Knife?

From a tugboat by the river
A cement bag's dropping down;
The cement's just for the weight, dear.
Bet you Mackie's back in town.

Louie Miller disappeared, dear
After drawing out his cash;
And Macheath spends like a sailor.
Did our boy do something rash?

Sukey Tawdry, Jenny Diver,
Polly Peachum, Lucy Brown
Oh, the line forms on the right, dear
Now that Mackie's back in town.

Bertolt Brecht

My young son asks me

My young son asks me: Must I learn mathematics?
What is the use, I feel like saying. That two pieces
Of bread are more than one's about all you'll end up with.
My young son asks me: Must I learn French?
What is the use, I feel like saying. This State's collapsing.
And if you just rub your belly with your hand and
Groan, you'll be understood with little trouble.
My young son asks me: Must I learn history?
What is the use, I feel like saying. Learn to stick
Your head in the earth, and maybe you'll still survive.

Yes, learn mathematics, I tell him.
Learn your French, learn your history!

Bertolt Brecht

My young son asks me...

My young son asks me: Must I learn mathematics?
What is the use, I feel like saying. That two pieces
Of bread are more than one's about all you'll end up with.
My young son asks me: Must I learn French?
What is the use, I feel like saying. This State's collapsing.
And if you just rub your belly with your hand and
Groan, you'll be understood with little trouble.
My young son asks me: Must I learn history?
What is the use, I feel like saying. Learn to stick
Your head in the earth, and maybe you'll still survive.

Yes, learn mathematics, I tell him.
Learn your French, learn your history!

Bertolt Brecht

Not What Was Meant

When the Academy of Arts demanded freedom
Of artistic expression from narrow-minded bureaucrats
There was a howl and a clamour in its immediate vicinity
But roaring above everything
Came a deafening thunder of applause
From beyond the Sector boundary.
Freedom! it roared. Freedom for the artists!
Freedom all round! Freedom for all!
Freedom for the exploiters! Freedom for the warmongers!
Freedom for the Ruhr cartels! Freedom for Hitler's generals!
Softly, my dear fellows...
The Judas kiss for the artists follows
Hard on the Judas kiss for the workers.
The arsonist with his bottle of petrol
Sneaks up grinning to
The Academy of Arts.
But it was not to embrace him, just
To knock the bottle out of his dirty hand that
We asked for elbow room.
Even the narrowest minds
In which peace is harboured
Are more welcome to the arts than the art lover

Who is also a lover of the art of war.

Bertolt Brecht

O Germany, Pale Mother!

*Let others speak of her shame,
I speak of my own.*

O Germany, pale mother!
How soiled you are
As you sit among the peoples.
You flaunt yourself
Among the besmirched.

The poorest of your sons
Lies struck down.
When his hunger was great.
Your other sons
Raised their hands against him.
This is notorious.

With their hands thus raised,
Raised against their brother,
They march insolently around you
And laugh in your face.
This is well known.

In your house
Lies are roared aloud.
But the truth
Must be silent.
Is it so?

Why do the oppressors praise you everywhere,
The oppressed accuse you?
The plundered
Point to you with their fingers, but
The plunderer praises the system
That was invented in your house!

Whereupon everyone sees you
Hiding the hem of your mantle which is bloody
With the blood
Of your best sons.

Hearing the harangues which echo from your house,
men laugh.
But whoever sees you reaches for a knife
As at the approach of a robber.

O Germany, pale mother!
How have your sons arrayed you
That you sit among the peoples
A thing of scorn and fear!

Bertolt Brecht

On Reading a Recent Greek Poet

After the wailing had already begun
along the walls, their ruin certain,
the Trojans fidgeted with bits of wood
in the three-ply doors, itsy-bitsy
pieces of wood, fussing with them.
And began to get their nerve back and feel hopeful.

Bertolt Brecht

On the Critical Attitude

The critical attitude
Strikes many people as unfruitful
That is because they find the state
Impervious to their criticism
But what in this case is an unfruitful attitude
Is merely a feeble attitude. Give criticism arms
And states can be demolished by it.

Canalising a river
Grafting a fruit tree
Educating a person
Transforming a state
These are instances of fruitful criticism
And at the same time instances of art.

Bertolt Brecht

Parting

We embrace.
Rich cloth under my fingers
While yours touch poor fabric.
A quick embrace
You were invited for dinner
While the minions of law are after me.
We talk about the weather and our
Lasting friendship. Anything else
Would be too bitter.

Bertolt Brecht

Questions From a Worker Who Reads

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished
Who raised it up so many times? In what houses
of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?
Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished
Did the masons go? Great Rome
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song
Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis
The night the ocean engulfed it
The drowning still bawled for their slaves.

The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not have even a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada
Went down. Was he the only one to weep?
Frederick the Second won the Seven Year's War. Who
Else won it?

Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man?
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.
So many questions.

Bertolt Brecht

Radio Poem

You little box, held to me escaping
So that your valves should not break
Carried from house to house to ship from sail to train,
So that my enemies might go on talking to me,
Near my bed, to my pain
The last thing at night, the first thing in the morning,
Of their victories and of my cares,
Promise me not to go silent all of a sudden.

Bertolt Brecht

Send Me a Leaf

Send me a leaf, but from a bush
That grows at least one half hour
Away from your house, then
You must go and will be strong, and I
Thank you for the pretty leaf.

Bertolt Brecht

Solidarity Song

Peoples of the world, together
Join to serve the common cause!
So it feeds us all for ever
See to it that it's now yours.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

Black or white or brown or yellow
Leave your old disputes behind.
Once start talking with your fellow
Men, you'll soon be of one mind.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

If we want to make this certain
We'll need you and your support.
It's yourselves you'll be deserting
if you rat your own sort.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

All the gang of those who rule us
Hope our quarrels never stop
Helping them to split and fool us
So they can remain on top.

Forward, without forgetting
Where our strength can be seen now to be!
When starving or when eating
Forward, not forgetting
Our solidarity!

Workers of the world, uniting
That's the way to lose your chains.
Mighty regiments now are fighting
That no tyranny remains!

Forward, without forgetting
Till the concrete question is hurled
When starving or when eating:

Whose tomorrow is tomorrow?
And whose world is the world?

Bertolt Brecht

The Mask Of Evil

On my wall hangs a Japanese carving,
The mask of an evil demon, decorated with gold lacquer.
Sympathetically I observe
The swollen veins of the forehead, indicating
What a strain it is to be evil.

Bertolt Brecht

The Solution

After the uprising of the 17th June
The Secretary of the Writers Union
Had leaflets distributed in the Stalinallee
Stating that the people
Had forfeited the confidence of the government
And could win it back only
By redoubled efforts. Would it not be easier
In that case for the government
To dissolve the people
And elect another?

Bertolt Brecht

To Be Read in the Morning and at Night

My love
Has told me
That he needs me.

That's why
I take good care of myself
Watch out where I'm going and
Fear that any drop of rain
Might kill me.

Bertolt Brecht

To Posterity

1.

Indeed I live in the dark ages!
A guileless word is an absurdity. A smooth forehead betokens
A hard heart. He who laughs
Has not yet heard
The terrible tidings.

Ah, what an age it is
When to speak of trees is almost a crime
For it is a kind of silence about injustice!
And he who walks calmly across the street,
Is he not out of reach of his friends
In trouble?

It is true: I earn my living
But, believe me, it is only an accident.
Nothing that I do entitles me to eat my fill.
By chance I was spared. (If my luck leaves me
I am lost.)

They tell me: eat and drink. Be glad you have it!
But how can I eat and drink
When my food is snatched from the hungry
And my glass of water belongs to the thirsty?
And yet I eat and drink.

I would gladly be wise.
The old books tell us what wisdom is:
Avoid the strife of the world
Live out your little time
Fearing no one
Using no violence
Returning good for evil --
Not fulfillment of desire but forgetfulness
Passes for wisdom.
I can do none of this:
Indeed I live in the dark ages!

2.

I came to the cities in a time of disorder
When hunger ruled.
I came among men in a time of uprising
And I revolted with them.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.

I ate my food between massacres.
The shadow of murder lay upon my sleep.
And when I loved, I loved with indifference.
I looked upon nature with impatience.

So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.

In my time streets led to the quicksand.
Speech betrayed me to the slaughterer.
There was little I could do. But without me
The rulers would have been more secure. This was my hope.
So the time passed away
Which on earth was given me.

3.

You, who shall emerge from the flood
In which we are sinking,
Think --
When you speak of our weaknesses,
Also of the dark time
That brought them forth.

For we went, changing our country more often than our shoes.
In the class war, despairing
When there was only injustice and no resistance.

For we knew only too well:
Even the hatred of squalor
Makes the brow grow stern.
Even anger against injustice
Makes the voice grow harsh. Alas, we
Who wished to lay the foundations of kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when at last it comes to pass
That man can help his fellow man,
Do not judge us
Too harshly.

translated by H. R. Hays

Bertolt Brecht

To read in the morning and at night...

[Original]

Morgens und abends zu lesen
Der, den ich liebe
Hat mir gesagt
Daß er mich braucht.

Darum
Gebe ich auf mich acht
Sehe auf meinen Weg und
Fürchte von jedem Regentropfen
Daß er mich erschlagen könnte.

[Translation]

To read in the morning and at night
My love
Has told me
That he needs me.

That's why
I take good care of myself
Watch out where I'm going and
Fear that any drop of rain
Might kill me.

Bertolt Brecht

To the Students of the Workers' and Peasants' Faculty

So there you sit. And how much blood was shed
That you might sit there. Do such stories bore you?
Well, don't forget that others sat before you
who later sat on people. Keep your head!
Your science will be valueless, you'll find
And learning will be sterile, if inviting
Unless you pledge your intellect to fighting
Against all enemies of all mankind.
Never forget that men like you got hurt
That you might sit here, not the other lot.
And now don't shut your eyes, and don't desert
But learn to learn, and try to learn for what.

Bertolt Brecht

To Those Born After

I

To the cities I came in a time of disorder
That was ruled by hunger.
I sheltered with the people in a time of uproar
And then I joined in their rebellion.
That's how I passed my time that was given to me on this Earth.

I ate my dinners between the battles,
I lay down to sleep among the murderers,
I didn't care for much for love
And for nature's beauties I had little patience.
That's how I passed my time that was given to me on this Earth.

The city streets all led to foul swamps in my time,
My speech betrayed me to the butchers.
I could do only little
But without me those that ruled could not sleep so easily:
That's what I hoped.
That's how I passed my time that was given to me on this Earth.

Our forces were slight and small,
Our goal lay in the far distance
Clearly in our sights,
If for me myself beyond my reaching.
That's how I passed my time that was given to me on this Earth.

II

You who will come to the surface
From the flood that's overwhelmed us and drowned us all
Must think, when you speak of our weakness in times of darkness
That you've not had to face:

Days when we were used to changing countries
More often than shoes,
Through the war of the classes despairing
That there was only injustice and no outrage.

Even so we realised
Hatred of oppression still distorts the features,
Anger at injustice still makes voices raised and ugly.
Oh we, who wished to lay for the foundations for peace and friendliness,
Could never be friendly ourselves.

And in the future when no longer
Do human beings still treat themselves as animals,
Look back on us with indulgence.

Bertolt Brecht

United Front Song

And because a man is human
He'll want to eat, and thanks a lot
But talk can't take the place of meat
or fill an empty pot.

So left, two, three!
So left, two, three!
Comrade, there's a place for you.
Take your stand in the workers united front
For you are a worker too.

And because a man is human
he won't care for a kick in the face.
He doesn't want slaves under him
Or above him a ruling class.

So left, two, three!
So left, two, three!
Comrade, there's a place for you.
Take your stand in the workers united front
For you are a worker too.

And because a worker's a worker
No one else will bring him liberty.
It's nobody's work but the worker' own
To set the worker free.

So left, two, three!
So left, two, three!
Comrade, there's a place for you.
Take your stand in the workers united front
For you are a worker too.

Bertolt Brecht

What Has Happened?

The industrialist is having his aeroplane serviced.
The priest is wondering what he said in his sermon eight weeks ago
about tithes.
The generals are putting on civvies and looking like bank clerks.
Public officials are getting friendly.
The policeman points out the way to the man in the cloth cap.
The landlord comes to see whether the water supply is working.
The journalists write the word People with capital letters.
The singers sing at the opera for nothing.
Ships' captains check the food in the crew's galley,
Car owners get in beside their chauffeurs.
Doctors sue the insurance companies.
Scholars show their discoveries and hide their decorations.
Farmers deliver potatoes to the barracks.
The revolution has won its first battle:
That's what has happened.

Bertolt Brecht