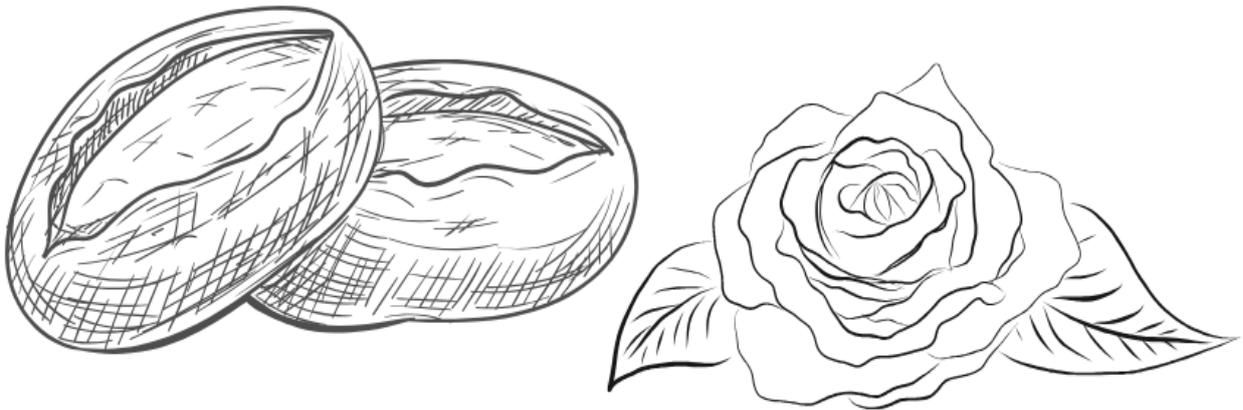


BREAD & ROSES

Poetry and readings offering
company, comfort and connection.



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#SharedReading

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 The
Reader

About this anthology

The Reader is a charity which usually brings people together to listen to stories, extracts and poems in free, weekly Shared Reading groups that take place in community spaces, prisons, hospitals, libraries and on high streets across the UK.

While in lockdown, many aspects of our usual way of life may have been suspended but literature's ability to offer us comfort, escapism and fellow feeling remains 'as true as it ever was'[1].

Through the national emergency, The Reader's aim as an organisation continues to be to help humans survive and live well. To this end we are providing two services – literature to nourish the spirit of all and, from our national HQ at Calderstones Mansion in Liverpool, food to keep the body alive for people locally in most need.

In the words of the early female unionists of the US, who recognised that life was not only about basic breadline necessities but also about the ineffable beauty of the world, 'give us bread, but give us roses'.

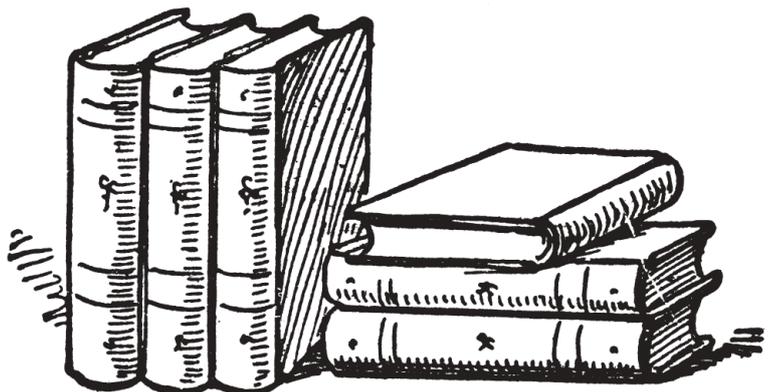
We hope you can find within the pages of this anthology sustenance for the spirit and aid in glimpsing the roses.

Whether you're used to doing this or not, you may also like to have a go at reading the words of a poem or a story out loud to yourself.

Although it may feel strange to begin with, this is a great way to make the words present when our minds are distracted and full. 'The Lofty Sky' by Edward Thomas is a great place to start.

CONTENTS

- 3** *The Lofty Sky*
by Edward Thomas
- 5** extract from *The Secret Garden*
by Frances Hodgson Burnett
- 9** *Home-Thoughts, from Abroad*
by Robert Browning
- 10** I am reminded of these lines...
- 11** *Sympathy*
by Paul Laurence Dunbar
- 12** I am reminded of these lines...



1 From Little Dorrit, Charles Dickens

The Lofty Sky

by Edward Thomas

To-day I want the sky,
The tops of the high hills,
Above the last man's house,
His hedges, and his cows,
Where, if I will, I look
Down even on sheep and rook,
And of all things that move
See buzzards only above: -
Past all trees, past furze
And thorn, where nought deters
The desire of the eye
For sky, nothing but sky.
I sicken of the woods
And all the multitudes
Of hedge-trees. They are no more
Than weeds upon this floor
Of the river of air
Leagues deep, leagues wide, where
I am like a fish that lives
In weeds and mud and gives
What's above him no thought.
I might be a tench for aught
That I can do to-day
Down on the wealden clay.
Even the tench has days
When he floats up and plays
Among the lily leaves
And sees the sky, or grieves
Not if he nothing sees:
While I, I know that trees
Under that lofty sky
Are weeds, fields mud, and I
Would arise and go far
To where the lilies are.

Time to Pause ...

Have you been feeling down recently? This poem doesn't start with where we are, but with where we want to be. Immediately, it gives us height: 'tops', 'above', 'look down'. I wonder where you imagine yourself to be here, and what you can see. Try and stay up there, hovering just for a moment, if you can.

Are you fed up? It is okay to admit to being so. It may be that at the moment, the places to which we might normally retreat do not provide what we most need: 'I sicken of the woods / And all the multitudes / Of hedge-trees.'

Is your energy spent? The poet begins comparing himself to a fish halfway through the poem, only to find that the thought takes him further than perhaps he had intended. It doesn't stop with 'I am like a fish', but continues on, 'I might be a tench', until he reaches a further thought: 'Even the tench has days ...' How does it feel as you follow the poet through these three thoughts?

The end of the poem seems to return us somehow to where we were at the beginning. I wonder what it is about those lilies?

Readers Say...

"Having had two girls of my own, this poem reminds me of that sense of need that I felt during my maternity leave, both times. It's not about parenthood, but it's about wanting to be out, in nature, in the open air, away from all the things that drag you down. It begins 'Today I want the sky...' For me it captures a sense of wanting to escape the day to day tiredness and emerge into a world of clear space and thought."



from *The Secret Garden*

(chapter 13)

by Frances Hodgson Burnett

Two isolated children, both ten years of age, live in the same house without knowing anything of each other. In this passage, Mary follows a strange sound and manages to stumble upon a new companion.

She had been lying awake turning from side to side for about an hour, when suddenly something made her sit up in bed and turn her head toward the door listening. She listened and she listened.

"It isn't the wind now," she said in a loud whisper. "That isn't the wind. It is different. It is that crying I heard before."

The door of her room was ajar and the sound came down the corridor, a far-off faint sound of fretful crying. She listened for a few minutes and each minute she became more and more sure. She felt as if she must find out what it was. It seemed even stranger than the secret garden and the buried key. Perhaps the fact that she was in a rebellious mood made her bold. She put her foot out of bed and stood on the floor.

"I am going to find out what it is," she said. "Everybody is in bed and I don't care about Mrs. Medlock—I don't care!"

There was a candle by her bedside and she took it up and went softly out of the room. The corridor looked very long and dark, but she was too excited to mind that. She thought she remembered the corners she must turn to find the short corridor with the door covered with tapestry—the one Mrs. Medlock had come through the day she lost herself. The sound had come up that passage. So she went on with her dim light, almost feeling her way, her heart beating so loud that she fancied she could hear it. The far-off faint crying went on and led her. Sometimes it stopped for a moment or so and then began again. Was this the right corner to turn? She stopped and thought. Yes it was. Down this passage and then to the left, and then up two broad steps, and then to the right again. Yes, there was the tapestry door.

She pushed it open very gently and closed it behind her, and she stood in the corridor and could hear the crying quite plainly, though it was not loud. It was on the other side of the wall at her left and a few yards farther on there was a door. She could see a glimmer of light coming from beneath it. The Someone was crying in that room, and it was quite a young Someone.

So she walked to the door and pushed it open, and there she was standing in the room!

It was a big room with ancient, handsome furniture in it. There was a low fire glowing faintly on the hearth and a night light burning by the side of a carved four-posted bed

hung with brocade, and on the bed was lying a boy, crying fretfully.

Mary wondered if she was in a real place or if she had fallen asleep again and was dreaming without knowing it.

The boy had a sharp, delicate face the color of ivory and he seemed to have eyes too big for it. He had also a lot of hair which tumbled over his forehead in heavy locks and made his thin face seem smaller. He looked like a boy who had been ill, but he was crying more as if he were tired and cross than as if he were in pain.

Mary stood near the door with her candle in her hand, holding her breath. Then she crept across the room, and, as she drew nearer, the light attracted the boy's attention and he turned his head on his pillow and stared at her, his gray eyes opening so wide that they seemed immense.

"Who are you?" he said at last in a half-frightened whisper. "Are you a ghost?"

"No, I am not," Mary answered, her own whisper sounding half frightened. "Are you one?"

He stared and stared and stared. Mary could not help noticing what strange eyes he had. They were agate gray and they looked too big for his face because they had black lashes all round them.

"No," he replied after waiting a moment or so. "I am Colin."

"Who is Colin?" she faltered.

"I am Colin Craven. Who are you?"

"I am Mary Lennox. Mr. Craven is my uncle."

"He is my father," said the boy.

"Your father!" gasped Mary. "No one ever told me he had a boy! Why didn't they?"

"Come here," he said, still keeping his strange eyes fixed on her with an anxious expression.

She came close to the bed and he put out his hand and touched her.

"You are real, aren't you?" he said. "I have such real dreams very often. You might be one of them."

Mary had slipped on a woolen wrapper before she left her room and she put a piece of it between his fingers.

"Rub that and see how thick and warm it is," she said. "I will pinch you a little if you like, to show you how real I am. For a minute I thought you might be a dream too."

"Where did you come from?" he asked.

"From my own room. The wind wuthered so I couldn't go to sleep and I heard someone crying and wanted to find out who it was. What were you crying for?"

"Because I couldn't go to sleep either and my head ached. Tell me your name again."

"Mary Lennox. Did no one ever tell you I had come to live here?"

He was still fingering the fold of her wrapper, but he began to look a little more as if he believed in her reality.

"No," he answered. "They daren't."

"Why?" asked Mary.

"Because I should have been afraid you would see me. I won't let people see me and talk me over."

"Why?" Mary asked again, feeling more mystified every moment.

"Because I am like this always, ill and having to lie down. My father won't let people talk me over either. The servants are not allowed to speak about me. If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan't live. My father hates to think I may be like him."

"Oh, what a queer house this is!" Mary said. "What a queer house! Everything is a kind of secret. Rooms are locked up and gardens are locked up—and you! Have you been locked up?"

"No. I stay in this room because I don't want to be moved out of it. It tires me too much."

"Does your father come and see you?" Mary ventured.

"Sometimes. Generally when I am asleep. He doesn't want to see me."

"Why?" Mary could not help asking again.

A sort of angry shadow passed over the boy's face.

"My mother died when I was born and it makes him wretched to look at me. He thinks I don't know, but I've heard people talking. He almost hates me."

"He hates the garden, because she died," said Mary half speaking to herself.

"What garden?" the boy asked.

"Oh! just—just a garden she used to like," Mary stammered. "Have you been here always?"

"Nearly always. Sometimes I have been taken to places at the seaside, but I won't stay because people stare at me. I used to wear an iron thing to keep my back straight, but a grand doctor came from London to see me and said it was stupid. He told them to take it off and keep me out in the fresh air. I hate fresh air and I don't want to go out."

"I didn't when first I came here," said Mary. "Why do you keep looking at me like that?"

"Because of the dreams that are so real," he answered rather fretfully. "Sometimes when I open my eyes I don't believe I'm awake."

"We're both awake," said Mary. She glanced round the room with its high ceiling and shadowy corners and dim fire-light. "It looks quite like a dream, and it's the middle of the night, and everybody in the house is asleep—everybody but us. We are wide awake."

"I don't want it to be a dream," the boy said restlessly.

Mary thought of something all at once.

"If you don't like people to see you," she began, "do you want me to go away?"

He still held the fold of her wrapper and he gave it a little pull.

"No," he said. "I should be sure you were a dream if you went. If you are real, sit down on that big footstool and talk. I want to hear about you."

Mary put down her candle on the table near the bed and sat down on the cushioned stool. She did not want to go away at all. She wanted to stay in the mysterious hidden-away room and talk to the mysterious boy.



Home-thoughts from Abroad

by Robert Browning

Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England—now!

And after April, when May follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!
Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops—at the bent spray's edge—
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower
—Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!

Readers Say...

Imagine you're joining the group yourself as you read the comments below from readers who took part remotely in an online Shared Reading session:

There's lots of exclamation marks. Four in fact!" "He seems quite excited but I also think he's quite sad that he's going to be missing these scenes." "It mentions April, and May. He's not going to be in England for quite a long time; might miss the whole spring. I wonder how that would feel, knowing that you're homesick now, but knowing that there's going to be more ..."
"That's the difficulty with homesickness isn't it – it makes you want to connect with others at home but that takes you even further away from where you are."

"I'm drawn to the word 'unaware' in the fourth line. Something to do with things happening without us seeing them." "Sometimes nature happens and we are unaware it's happening. One minute the tree is bare and then it is in bud! It's hard to see it actually happening." "You get that period of time where everything is still just on the edge of blooming and coming into life, but it's all still very small and tentative. 'In tiny leaf.'"

"It's like we are abroad from ourselves." "Perhaps these thoughts and memories give him a sense of his real self – his real identity?" "There's that 'my blossomed pear-tree' – that tree is somehow with him, it's in there somewhere."

"'The wise thrush': it's as if we have some sort of deeper lesson to learn from the birds." "Do you think the poet is talking about himself?"

"On the surface this poem could seem like a nice poem about England, but there is a lot of depth to it – there is darkness in there as well, it seems like there's a bit of a troubled spirit in there."

I Am Reminded of These Lines...

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude

from *I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud*
by William Wordsworth



Sympathy

by Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!

 When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,
And the river flows like a stream of glass;

 When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals—
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing

 Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;
For he must fly back to his perch and cling
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;

 And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars
And they pulse again with a keener sting—
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,

 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—
When he beats his bars and he would be free;
It is not a carol of joy or glee,

 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings—
I know why the caged bird sings!

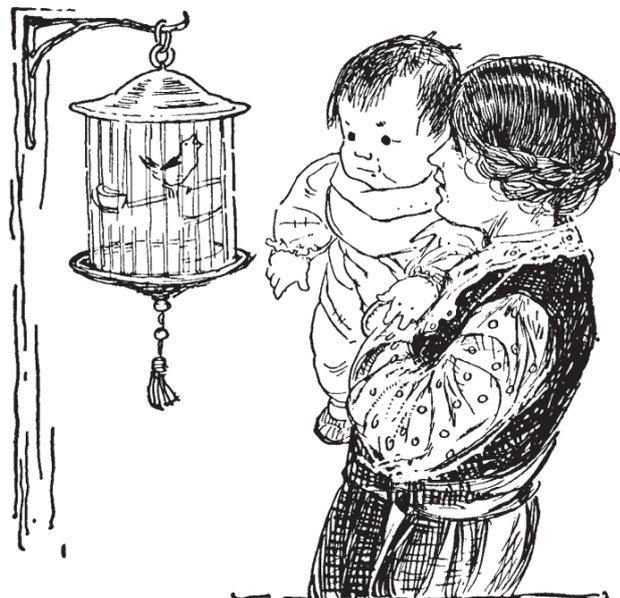
Readers Say...

'After I had read the poem in a Shared Reading group back in 2008, one woman, who is about seventy years old and has suffered from depression for most of her life, said "I think that is a lovely poem. I relate it to myself - with the prison bars and the bruised wings, I think about myself in here, but I also think about how I always make sure I go out and keep on going out, and walk around." '

I Am Reminded of These Lines...

Stone Walls do not a Prison make,
Nor Iron bars a Cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an Hermitage.
If I have freedom in my Love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone that soar above,
Enjoy such Liberty.

from To Althea,* from Prison
by Richard Lovelace



* related to the Greek root *Althe*, meaning 'to cure'

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You may also be interested in The Reader's magazine, relaunched this spring with Issue 71. Along with personal, passionate recommendations and discussion of great literature, the magazine showcases more of the stories and poems that have been read in Shared Reading groups. It also includes essays and articles which show how reading together builds meaning and connection, and helps with inner life, mental health and soul troubles.



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