

Six Young Men

Ted Hughes

The celluloid of a photograph holds them well –
Six young men, familiar to their friends.
Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged
This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.
Though their cocked hats are not now fashionable,
Their shoes shine. One imparts an intimate smile,
One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,
One is ridiculous with cocky pride –
Six months after this picture they were all dead.

All are trimmed for a Sunday jaunt. I know
That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,
Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit
You hear the water of seven streams fall
To the roarer in the bottom, and through all
The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.
Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,
And still that valley has not changed its sound
Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

This one was shot in an attack and lay
Calling in the wire, then this one, his best friend,
Went out to bring him in and was shot too;
And this one, the very moment he was warned
From potting at tin-cans in no-man's land,
Fell back dead with his rifle-sights shot away.
The rest, nobody knows what they came to,
But come to the worst they must have done, and held it
Closer than their hope; all were killed.
Here see a man's photograph,
The locket of a smile, turned overnight
Into the hospital of his mangled last
Agony and hours; see bundled in it
His mightier-than-a-man dead bulk and weight:
And on this one place which keeps him alive
(In his Sunday best) see fall war's worst
Thinkable flash and rending, onto his smile
Forty years rotting into soil.

That man's not more alive whom you confront
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak loud,
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,
Nor prehistoric or, fabulous beast more dead;
No thought so vivid as their smoking-blood:
To regard this photograph might well dement,
Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and heat.

Source: <https://genius.com/Ted-hughes-six-young-men-annotated>

Cinderella

By Roald Dahl

I guess you think you know this story.
You don't. The real one's much more gory.
The phoney one, the one you know,
Was cooked up years and years ago,
And made to sound all soft and sappy
just to keep the children happy.
Mind you, they got the first bit right,
The bit where, in the dead of night,
The Ugly Sisters, jewels and all,
Departed for the Palace Ball,
While darling little Cinderella
Was locked up in a slimy cellar,
Where rats who wanted things to eat,
Began to nibble at her feet.

She bellowed 'Help!' and 'Let me out!
The Magic Fairy heard her shout.
Appearing in a blaze of light,
She said: 'My dear, are you all right?'
'All right?' cried Cindy. 'Can't you see
'I feel as rotten as can be!'
She beat her fist against the wall,
And shouted, 'Get me to the Ball!
'There is a Disco at the Palace!
'The rest have gone and I am jealous!
'I want a dress! I want a coach!
'And earrings and a diamond brooch!
'And silver slippers, two of those!
'And lovely nylon panty hose!
'Done up like that I'll guarantee
'The handsome Prince will fall for me!'
The Fairy said, 'Hang on a tick.'
She gave her wand a mighty flick
And quickly, in no time at all,
Cindy was at the Palace Ball!

It made the Ugly Sisters wince
To see her dancing with the Prince.

She held him very tight and pressed
herself against his manly chest.
The Prince himself was turned to pulp,
All he could do was gasp and gulp.
Then midnight struck. She shouted, 'Heck!
I've got to run to save my neck!'
The Prince cried, 'No! Alas! Alack!'
He grabbed her dress to hold her back.
As Cindy shouted, 'Let me go!'
The dress was ripped from head to toe.

She ran out in her underwear,
And lost one slipper on the stair.
The Prince was on it like a dart,
He pressed it to his pounding heart,
'The girl this slipper fits,' he cried,
'Tomorrow morn shall be my bride!
I'll visit every house in town
'Until I've tracked the maiden down!'
Then rather carelessly, I fear,
He placed it on a crate of beer.

At once, one of the Ugly Sisters,
(The one whose face was blotched with blisters)
Sneaked up and grabbed the dainty shoe,
And quickly flushed it down the loo.
Then in its place she calmly put
The slipper from her own left foot.
Ah ha, you see, the plot grows thicker,
And Cindy's luck starts looking sicker.

Next day, the Prince went charging down
To knock on all the doors in town.
In every house, the tension grew.
Who was the owner of the shoe?
The shoe was long and very wide.
(A normal foot got lost inside.)
Also it smelled a wee bit icky.
(The owner's feet were hot and sticky.)
Thousands of eager people came
To try it on, but all in vain.
Now came the Ugly Sisters' go.

One tried it on. The Prince screamed, 'No!'
But she screamed, 'Yes! It fits! Whoopee!
'So now you've got to marry me!'
The Prince went white from ear to ear.
He muttered, 'Let me out of here.'
'Oh no you don't! You made a vow!
'There's no way you can back out now!'
'Off with her head!'The Prince roared back.
They chopped it off with one big whack.
This pleased the Prince. He smiled and said,
'She's prettier without her head.'
Then up came Sister Number Two,
Who yelled, 'Now I will try the shoe!'
'Try this instead!' the Prince yelled back.
He swung his trusty sword and smack
Her head went crashing to the ground.
It bounced a bit and rolled around.
In the kitchen, peeling spuds,
Cinderella heard the thuds
Of bouncing heads upon the floor,
And poked her own head round the door.
'What's all the racket?' Cindy cried.
'Mind your own bizz,' the Prince replied.
Poor Cindy's heart was torn to shreds.
My Prince! she thought. He chops off heads!
How could I marry anyone
Who does that sort of thing for fun?

The Prince cried, 'Who's this dirty slut?
'Off with her nut! Off with her nut!'
Just then, all in a blaze of light,
The Magic Fairy hove in sight,
Her Magic Wand went swoosh and swish!
'Cindy! 'she cried, 'come make a wish!
'Wish anything and have no doubt
'That I will make it come about!'
Cindy answered, 'Oh kind Fairy,
'This time I shall be more wary.
'No more Princes, no more money.
'I have had my taste of honey.
I'm wishing for a decent man.
'They're hard to find. D'you think you can?'

Within a minute, Cinderella
Was married to a lovely feller,
A simple jam maker by trade,
Who sold good home-made marmalade.
Their house was filled with smiles and laughter
And they were happy ever after.

Source: <https://allpoetry.com/poem/8503199-Cinderella-by-Roald-Dahl>

To Ben Jonson

By Thomas Carew

'Tis true, dear Ben, thy just chastising hand
Hath fix'd upon the sotted age a brand
To their swoll'n pride and empty scribbling due;
It can nor judge, nor write, and yet 'tis true
Thy comic muse, from the exalted line
Touch'd by thy Alchemist, doth since decline
From that her zenith, and foretells a red
And blushing evening, when she goes to bed;
Yet such as shall outshine the glimmering light
With which all stars shall gild the following night.
Nor think it much, since all thy eaglets may
Endure the sunny trial, if we say
This hath the stronger wing, or that doth shine
Trick'd up in fairer plumes, since all are thine.
Who hath his flock of cackling geese compar'd
With thy tun'd choir of swans? or else who dar'd
To call thy births deform'd? But if thou bind
By city-custom, or by gavelkind,
In equal shares thy love on all thy race,
We may distinguish of their sex, and place;
Though one hand form them, and though one brain strike
Souls into all, they are not all alike.
Why should the follies then of this dull age
Draw from thy pen such an immodest rage
As seems to blast thy else-immortal bays,
When thine own tongue proclaims thy itch of praise?
Such thirst will argue drouth. No, let be hurl'd
Upon thy works by the detracting world
What malice can suggest; let the rout say,
The running sands, that, ere thou make a play,
Count the slow minutes, might a Goodwin frame
To swallow, when th' hast done, thy shipwreck'd name;
Let them the dear expense of oil upbraid,
Suck'd by thy watchful lamp, that hath betray'd
To theft the blood of martyr'd authors, spilt
Into thy ink, whilst thou growest pale with guilt.
Repine not at the taper's thrifty waste,
That sleeks thy terser poems; nor is haste

Praise, but excuse; and if thou overcome
A knotty writer, bring the booty home;
Nor think it theft if the rich spoils so torn
From conquer'd authors be as trophies worn.
Let others glut on the extorted praise
Of vulgar breath, trust thou to after-days;
Thy labour'd works shall live when time devours
Th' abortive offspring of their hasty hours.
Thou are not of their rank, the quarrel lies
Within thine own verge; then let this suffice,
The wiser world doth greater thee confess
Than all men else, than thyself only less.

Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43882/to-ben-jonson>

Daddy

By Sylvia Plath

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.

So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48999/daddy-56d22aafa45b2>

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.

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

My Ornithology (Orange-crowned Warbler)

By Hai-Dang Phan

In the middle of my life, I found myself in an edge habitat
staring into dense tangles of blackberry and watching
a baffling fall warbler feeding drowsily in the shrubs.

He was strikingly plain, olive-green with grayish head,
you might even say dull, dark, dingy, distinctly indistinct—
an orange-crowned of the eastern celata subspecies!

Remarkably and characteristically late, a recent arrival
from the boreal north of Alaska and Canada, drifting south-
easterly across the Great Plains and Mississippi Valley

to tarry at my local patch in Warren County, IL,
he takes his dear sweet time, for what's the hurry.
Late this morning approaching the end of October,

among faded goldenrods, the black stars of spent flowers,
I had been walking along a familiar trail of dead leaves
still wet from the night's gentle frost, a heatless sun

over my shoulder, counting the kinglets fluttering high
above my head in the quaking aspens, counting the maple
leaves slowly rocking down to earth, counting the years.

Lucky, I heard his sharp chip calling from pokeweed!
He sent me into a rapt confusion, looking and listening
intently as I worked on making an identification.

No help, he conceals his crown wherever he goes.
So I trust who his eyelash-fine faint eyeline says he is,
note the details as he goes about his flitting ways,

from perch to perch, flashes of pale yellow under
his flicking tail. While others gorge on autumn berries,
he forages deliberately for his favorite invertebrates,

his pencil sharp bill probing into dead leaf clusters.
The spider tastes good to him. He sips the morning dew

glazed on the bronze leaf. He considers the cataract

of leaf light and vine light. Somewhat of a loner, it's true,
you won't catch him in a mob action, though he has
a travel companion and may fall into mixed flocks,

as the days on the wing can be tedious and dangerous.
He would stay here, but it is in his nature to go. Yet there
is still green to glean before moving on, and time.

Chances are I will be here tomorrow and the next day,
chances are I will look for him in the misty entanglements
as if pursuing the central mystery of his life, and mine.

Source: <https://www.poetrynw.org/poetry/hai-dang-phan-two-poems/>