

College Guild

P.O. Box 6448, Brunswick, ME 04011

POETRY CLUB III

Unit 7 of 7

Poems by Alfred Noyes, Louis MacNeice, and Ruth Yarrow

Alfred Noyes CBE was an English poet, short-story writer and playwright, best known for his ballads, "The Highwayman" and "The Barrel-Organ". Noyes was born in Wolverhampton, England, the son of Alfred and Amelia Adams Noyes. When he was four, the family moved to Aberystwyth, Wales, where his father taught Latin and Greek. The Welsh coast and mountains were an inspiration to Noyes. In 1898, he left Aberystwyth for Exeter College, Oxford, where he distinguished himself at rowing, but failed to get his degree because, on a crucial day of his finals in 1903, he was meeting his publisher to arrange publication of his first volume of poems, *The Loom of Years*.

(Because of the length of this poem, it will count as two poems from Alfred Noyes.)

The Highwayman

PART ONE

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees.
 The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.
 The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
 And the highwayman came riding –
 Riding – riding –
 The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

He'd a French cocked-hat on his forehead, a bunch of lace at his chin,
 A coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of brown doe-skin.
 They fitted with never a wrinkle. His boots were up to the thigh.
 And he rode with a jewelled twinkle,
 His pistol butts a-twinkle,
 His rapier hilt a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard.
 He tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred.
 He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
 But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
 Bess, the landlord's daughter,
 Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

And dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
 Where Tim the ostler listened. His face was white and peaked.
 His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy hay,
 But he loved the landlord's daughter,
 The landlord's red-lipped daughter.
 Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say—

“One kiss, my bonny sweetheart, I'm after a prize to-night,
 But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light;
 Yet, if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
 Then look for me by moonlight,
 Watch for me by moonlight,
 I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way.”

He rose upright in the stirrups. He scarce could reach her hand,
 But she loosened her hair in the casement. His face burnt like a brand
 As the black cascade of perfume came tumbling over his breast;
 And he kissed its waves in the moonlight,
 (O, sweet black waves in the moonlight!)
 Then he tugged at his rein in the moonlight, and galloped away to the west.

PART TWO

He did not come in the dawning. He did not come at noon;
 And out of the tawny sunset, before the rise of the moon,
 When the road was a gypsy's ribbon, looping the purple moor,
 A red-coat troop came marching –
 Marching – marching –
 King George's men came marching, up to the old inn-door.

They said no word to the landlord. They drank his ale instead.
 But they gagged his daughter, and bound her, to the foot of her narrow bed.
 Two of them knelt at her casement, with muskets at their side!
 There was death at every window;
 And hell at one dark window;
 For Bess could see, through her casement, the road that *he* would ride.

They had tied her up to attention, with many a sniggering jest.
 They had bound a musket beside her, with the muzzle beneath her breast!
 “Now, keep good watch!” and they kissed her. She heard the doomed man say –
Look for me by moonlight;
 Watch for me by moonlight;
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way!

She twisted her hands behind her; but all the knots held good!
 She writhed her hands till her fingers were wet with sweat or blood!
 They stretched and strained in the darkness, and the hours crawled by like years
 Till, now, on the stroke of midnight,
 Cold, on the stroke of midnight,
 The tip of one finger touched it! The trigger at least was hers!

The tip of one finger touched it. She strove no more for the rest.
 Up, she stood up to attention, with the muzzle beneath her breast.
 She would not risk their hearing; she would not strive again;
 For the road lay bare in the moonlight;
 Blank and bare in the moonlight;
 And the blood of her veins, in the moonlight, throbbed to her love's refrain.

Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot! Had they heard it? The horsehoofs ringing clear;
Tlot-tlot; tlot-tlot, in the distance? Were they deaf that they did not hear?
 Down the ribbon of moonlight, over the brow of the hill,
 The highwayman came riding –
 Riding – riding –
 The red coats looked to their priming! She stood up, straight and still.

Tlot-tlot, in the frosty silence! *Tlot-tlot,* in the echoing night!
 Nearer he came and nearer. Her face was like a light.
 Her eyes grew wide for a moment; she drew one last deep breath,
 Then her finger moved in the moonlight,
 Her musket shattered the moonlight,
 Shattered her breast in the moonlight and warned him – with her death.

He turned. He spurred to the west; he did not know who stood
 Bowed, with her head o'er the musket, drenched with her own blood!
 Not till the dawn he heard it, and his face grew grey to hear
 How Bess, the landlord's daughter,
 The landlord's black-eyed daughter,
 Had watched for her love in the moonlight, and died in the darkness there.

Back, he spurred like a madman, shrieking a curse to the sky,
 With the white road smoking behind him and his rapier brandished high.
 Blood red were his spurs in the golden noon; wine-red was his velvet coat;
 When they shot him down on the highway,
 Down like a dog on the highway,
 And he lay in his blood on the highway, with a bunch of lace at his throat.

*And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
 A highwayman comes riding –
Riding – riding –
A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.*

*Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard.
He taps with his whip on the shutters, but all is locked and barred.
He whistles a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
 Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.*

Louis MacNeice

Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) was a friend and contemporary of W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender at Oxford and his poetry has often been linked to their own. Whilst sharing certain characteristics with them, including a sharp political awareness, in recent years MacNeice's poetry has been re-evaluated on its own terms, particularly by a new generation of Northern Irish poets such as Michael Longley and Paul Muldoon who've acknowledged him as a major influence. MacNeice's family were from the West of Ireland but he was born in Belfast to a Protestant clergyman father and a mother whose mental illness and premature death disturbed MacNeice for the rest of his life. These early years were recalled later as a time of darkness and loneliness presided over by the strict figure of his father. MacNeice was sent to England for his schooling, to Marlborough, and he then went on to read classics at Oxford. His professional life began as a lecturer in classics but in 1941 he joined the BBC and for the next twenty years produced programmes for the legendary Features Department, including his own celebrated parable-play, *The Dark Tower*. He died from pneumonia in 1963 following an expedition to the pot-holes of Yorkshire to record sounds for a radio play.

Meeting Point

Time was away and somewhere else,
 There were two glasses and two chairs
 And two people with the one pulse
 (Somebody stopped the moving stairs):
 Time was away and somewhere else.

And they were neither up nor down;
 The stream's music did not stop
 Flowing through heather, limpid brown,
 Although they sat in a coffee shop
 And they were neither up nor down.

The bell was silent in the air
 Holding its inverted poise—
 Between the clang and clang a flower,
 A brazen calyx of no noise:
 The bell was silent in the air.

The camels crossed the miles of sand
 That stretched around the cups and plates;
 The desert was their own, they planned
 To portion out the stars and dates:
 The camels crossed the miles of sand.

Time was away and somewhere else
 The waiter did not come, the clock
 Forgot them and the radio waltz
 Came out like water from a rock:
 Time was away and somewhere else.

Her fingers flicked away the ash
 That bloomed again in tropic trees:
 Not caring if the markets crash
 When they had forests such as these,
 Her fingers flicked away the ash.

God or whatever means the Good
 Be praised that time can stop like this,
 That what the heart has understood
 Can verify in the body's peace
 God or whatever means the Good.

Time was away and she was here
 And life no longer what it was,
 The bell was silent in the air
 And all the room one glow because
 Time was away and she was here.

Epilogue

Rows of books around me stand,
Fence me in on either hand;
Through that forest of dead words
I would hunt the living birds -
So I write these lines for you
Who have felt the death-wish too,
All the wires are cut, my friends
Live beyond the severed ends.

Traditional Japanese haiku poems follow a 17 syllable (5-7-5), three line format. Modern haiku follows the three line format but not the 17 syllable (5-7-5) format. The following are examples of Modern Japanese haiku by Ruth Yarrow.

Ruth Yarrow is a naturalist, environmental educator, activist and organizer for peace, justice and a sustainable planet. Few active poets in North America have shared their haiku in as sustained and distinctive a way as Ruth Yarrow. Her haiku offer a passionate environmental vision, reflecting her love and respect for the outdoors. These poems, innovatively organized by location through the four points of the compass, show how she is lit from within, and how haiku is one of her brightest lights.

The following are from a collection called *“Lit from Within”* by Ruth Yarrow.

picking the last pears
yellow windows hand
in the dusk

canyon dawn
a bat folding dark
into a crevice

each minnow’s shadow
loose on the lake bottom --
only mine attached

against the wind
we hold the peace banner –
our spines straighten

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes