SHE IS FIERCE
BOLD, BRAVE AND BEAUTIFUL POEMS BY WOMEN
CHOSEN BY ANA SAMPSON

Introduction

It's an exciting time for poetry. Slams and performances are attracting huge audiences; book sales are booming; some of today's biggest online superstars are poets. Women are at the forefront of this movement: winning prizes, headlining festivals, topping bestseller lists and connecting with thousands of readers in digital spaces. It has not always been so.

Anthologies have traditionally been dominated by male voices, seasoned with a mere scattering of women – usually, the same few names. And yet women – wondered at and worshipped by male poets – danced through and dominated those pages. It puzzled me, so I started reading.

Women's songs have always formed a part of oral traditions, though these were often not recorded. Female poets were active in the ancient world but, for the most part, their work was not preserved and some – like Sappho's – was edited or suppressed later. Throughout history and into our own times, women have faced educational, religious and social limitations on their freedom both to write and – especially – to publish. During most eras, it was almost exclusively aristocratic women who had the leisure, learning and liberty to become known as poets.

For centuries it was considered shocking for women to lift their eyes from the housework and seek employment outside the home, and especially for them to trespass in the 'male' arena of literature. Women writers were condemned, or mocked. Parents worried in case potential husbands were put off by their bookish daughters. It has been hard for women – especially if they are also mothers – to find time to work, and to get that work taken seriously. We will never know how many women wrote but didn't dare publish, or exactly how many published under pseudonyms (often men's names), as George Eliot and the Brontë sisters felt that they must.

It was often felt that women should stick to certain subjects – family, friendship, dutiful religion and the prettier corners of nature – and they have written beautifully and powerfully about all these. However, in the poems gathered here and elsewhere, female poets consider every possible subject: science and our magnificent universe; politics and protest; bodies and belief; myths and mental health; war and displacement.

I have included brief biographies of the poets – and what women they were, and are! From suffragettes and freed slaves to schoolgirls, I was fascinated to uncover their stories, many of which were new to me and will, I think, be new to you. Some of these women faced poverty, war, physical and mental illness, oppressive societies and cruelty, but they spun from their experiences wonderful poetry that will speak to readers for generations to come.

Poetry is personal, so any anthology must carry a sincere apology for omissions. I have never found the process of whittling down a longlist more agonising – there were hundreds of poems loved and lost in the process. I hope you will find in this book a diverse but representative choir of voices – many of which have been unheard for too long – and there will be something unfamiliar and intriguing for every reader. I wish you as much joy reading it as I had compiling it.

Ana Sampson

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from 'My roots spread' – Roots and Growing Up

Diaspora

My roots spread tap and spur from Portugal
the slap, of turquoise seas, on distant sands.
Stems of mine came from ice to Africa
later - to boast a son of Abraham.

I am fertile seed, carried from Ireland
emeralds rich with peat and blue mountain mists
I am black-work under pomegranate suns
the tale, of a princess of Spain, no less.

Red branches - an envelope, from a new
Chinese uncle. I am a paper dragon
dance, animal years that blossom haiku.
Grown from Gaul leaves, Roman petals sprout words,

Pict, Viking, Saxon, Norman, conquered
with prayer or sword. I am Indian spices
a Maharaja wearing a silk peacock
I am chi, pashmina and pyjamas.

I am every woman, man and small child
in every mirror - puzzles of ancestry
we who call ourselves British, yet as I
sometime migrants invaders refugees.

Sue Hardy-Dawson

Sue is a poet and artist who has been widely published in children's anthologies. Before becoming a poet she was a family support worker and teaching assistant – Sue has dyslexia and is passionate about encouraging children with special educational needs. She runs multi-sensory poetry workshops for children of all ages.

from 'My heart has made its mind up': Love

Practice

As a teenager, fencing was the closest thing
I knew to desire, all the girls swapping one

uniform for another before practice, their white
dresses replaced by breeches. I thought we were

princes in a fairy tale with a twist, since
there were no princesses to be taken, wed.

As knights, we were told to aim for an imaginary
spot just above our opponent's left breast. Often,

I left a bruise: the blade's tip ricocheting off chest-
guards onto flesh. Just as often, I would feel yellow

blooms of ache where the girl I thought was beautiful
had pierced my heart. Hours later, I would transform.

I would head back home with a deepening
sense of dread, my bruises fading to quiet.

Mary Jean Chan

Hong Kong poet Mary Jean Chan has been widely published in journals and magazines and won numerous prizes in advance of her first full poetry collection. Her prize-winning poem '//' (or 'Chopsticks') was written after visiting Hong Kong with her partner and experiencing its conservative attitude towards LGBTQ couples. She is also a critic and is passionate about exploring the places where poetry and politics meet.

A Decade

When you came, you were like red wine and honey,
And the taste of you burnt my mouth with its sweetness.
Now you are like morning bread,
Smooth and pleasant.
I hardly taste you at all for I know your savour,
But I am completely nourished.

Amy Lowell

Amy was from a prominent Massachusetts family who didn't think their daughters should go to college, but fortunately their mansion had a library stocked with seven thousand books. At twenty-eight years old she decided to become a poet, so she read intensively for eight years in preparation. She was a poetry pioneer and campaigned forcefully to bring it to a wider audience by lecturing, translating and nurturing new talent. A flamboyant and eccentric figure with a prince-nez, a bun and a cigar permanently in hand, Amy became a poetry celebrity. She lived with actress Ada Dwyer Russell, to whom many of her poems are addressed.

LOVE COMES BACK

Like your father,
twenty years later with the packet of cigarettes he went out for
Like Monday but this is the nineteenth century
& you're a monied aristocrat with no conception of the working week

Like a haunted board game
pried from the rubble of an archaeological dig site
You roll the dice & bats come flooding out your heart
like molten grappling hooks
your resolve weakening...
like the cord of an antique disco ball...

Love like the recurring decimal of some huge, indivisible number
or a well thrown boomerang
coming to rest in the soft curve of your hand

Love comes back...
like a murderer returning to the scene of the crime...
or not returning...
yet still the crime remains...
like love...
observed or unobserved...
written in blood on the walls of some ancient civilisation
in an idiom so old
we have no contemporary vernacular equivalent

Love like Windows 95
The greatest, most user-friendly Windows of them all
Those four little panes of light
Like the stained glass of an ancient church
vibrating in the sunlit rubble
of the twentieth century

Your face comes floating up in my crystal ball....

The lights come on at the bottom of the ocean
& here we are alone again...

Late November
we ride the black escalator of the mountain
& emerge into the altitude of our last year
The rabbit in the grass gives us something wild to aim for
It twists into spring like a living bell

I have to be here always telling you that
no matter how far I travel beyond you
love will stay tethered
like an evil kite I want to always reel back in

As if we could just turn and wade back
through the ghost of some ancient season
or wake each morning in the heat of a vanished life

Love comes back
from where it's never gone...It was here the whole time
like a genetic anomaly waiting to reveal itself
Like spring at the museum, after centuries of silence
the bronze wings of gladiator helmets trembling in their sockets...
Grecian urns sprouting new leaves...

Love like a hand from the grave
trembling up into the sunlight of the credit sequence
the names of the dead
pouring down the screen
like cool spring rain

Hera Lindsay Bird

Hera Lindsay Bird is from Wellington, New Zealand, where she works in a bookshop. Her first book Hera Lindsay Bird was published in 2016, and her second, Pamper Me to Hell and Back, in 2018. Some of her poems – including 'Monica', about the Friends character – have been viral online sensations. Hera attempted to write serious poetry but found it 'dead on the page' and her caustic, witty verses have won her many awards and legions of fans. She likes murder mysteries and watching ice-skating.

There Will Come Soft Rains

There will come soft rains and the smell of the
ground,
And swallows circling with their shimmering
sound;

And frogs in the pools, singing at night,
And wild plum trees in tremulous white,

Robins will wear their feathery fire,
Whistling their whims on a low fence-wire;

And not one will know of the war, not one
Will care at last when it is done.

Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree,
If mankind perished utterly;

And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn,
Would scarcely know that we were gone.

Sara Teasdale

Sara's poetry was hugely successful, and she won the first Pulitzer Prize in 1918 (when it was called the Columbia Poetry Prize). She had many suitors including a poet, Vachel Lindsay, who felt he couldn't support her financially, so she married and divorced another man instead. Afterwards, she rekindled her friendship with Lindsay who was by now married with children. He committed suicide and, two years later, Sara did the same. Her poem 'There Will Come Soft Rains' has had a varied cultural history – it provides the title for a short story by Ray Bradbury, and is recited by a robot after the apocalypse in the computer game Fallout 3.

from 'I'm glad I exist' – Freedom, Mindfulness and Joy

It Is Everywhere

Green leaves. Wind kissed.
Closed palms. Fresh hope.

Deep river. Free flow.
No signs. Open road.
Wide sky. Grow wings.
Feel light. Dream big.

No frame. New eyes.
From dark. Find light.

Hug air. Laugh loud.
Breathe deep. Dance wild.

Smile wide. Shut eyes.
Hold chest. Close mind.

Ask cloud. Ask wind.
Ask earth. Ask field.

How to live free?

Hold on. Let Go.
Give trust. Lend heart.
Fall down. Get up.
Eat fear. Drink hope.

Remi Graves

A former maths teacher, Remi is now a London-based poet and drummer who has performed at festivals and forms half of the musical poetry duo Gertrude and Jemima with South African poet Toni Stuart. She runs school workshops and loves working with young people to help them share their stories. She is Elmo's biggest fan.

This Poem . . .

This poem is dangerous: it should not be left
Within the reach of children, or even of adults
Who might swallow it whole, with possibly
Undesirable side-effects. If you come across
An unattended, unidentified poem
In a public place, do not attempt to tackle it
Yourself. Send it (preferably, in a sealed container)
To the nearest centre of learning, where it will be rendered
Harmless, by experts. Even the simplest poem
May destroy your immunity to human emotions.
All poems must carry a Government warning. Words
Can seriously affect your heart.

Elma Mitchell

Scottish poet Elma Mitchell worked as a librarian for the BBC. She was fluent in languages including Russian and worked as a translator and freelance writer, publishing poetry from the 1960s onwards. She worked in thatched barn that served as both library and study and was inhabited by rare bats. Elma read fiercely and brilliantly at her rare public readings, even when she was elderly and frail.

Boats in the Bay

I will take my trouble and wrap it in a blue handkerchief
And carry it down to the sea.
The sea is as smooth as silk, is as silent as glass;
It does not even whisper
Only the boats, rowed out by the girls in yellow
Ruffle its surface.
It is grey, not blue. It is flecked with boats like midges,
With happy people

Moving soundlessly over the level water.
I will take my trouble and drop it into the water
It is heavy as stone and smooth as a sea-washed pebble.
It will sink under the sea, and the happy people
Will row over it quietly, ruffling the clear water
Little dark boats like midges, skimming silently
Will pass backwards and forwards, the girls singing;
They will never know that they have sailed above sorrow.
Sink heavily and lie still, lie still my trouble.

Winifred Holtby

A feminist, socialist, pacifist and campaigner against racism, Winifred once wrote that a ‘passion for imparting information to females appears to be one of the major male characteristics’, spotting instances of ‘mansplaining’ seventy years before the word was coined. In 1931 she was diagnosed with Bright’s disease and given two years to live, and she poured all the energy of her last months into writing South Riding. Although better known during her life for her journalism, it is this last novel for which she is now remembered.

from 'Phenomenal Woman': Fashion, Society and Body Image

Poem in Which My Legs Are Accepted

Legs!
How we have suffered each other,
never meeting the standards of magazines
or official measurements.

I have hung you from trapezes,
sat you on wooden rollers,
pulled and pushed you
with the anxiety of taffy,
and still, you are yourselves!

Most obvious imperfection, blight on my fantasy life,
strong,
plump,
never to be skinny
or even hinting of the svelte beauties in history books
or Sears catalogues.
Here you are—solid, fleshy and
white as when I first noticed you, sitting on the toilet,
spread softly over the wooden seat,
having been with me only twelve years,
yet
as obvious as the legs of my thirty-year-old gym teacher.

Legs!
O that was the year we did acrobatics in the annual gym show.
How you split for me!
One-handed cartwheels
from this end of the gymnasium to the other,
ending in double splits,
legs you flashed in blue rayon slacks my mother bought for the occasion
and tho you were confidently swinging along,
the rest of me blushed at the sound of clapping.

Legs!
How I have worried about you, not able to hide you,
embarrassed at beaches, in highschool
when the cheerleaders' slim brown legs
spread all over
the sand
with the perfection
of bamboo.
I hated you, and still you have never given out on me.

With you
I have risen to the top of blue waves,
with you
I have carried food home as a loving gift
when my arms began
unjelling like madrilene.
Legs, you are a pillow,
white and plentiful with feathers for his wild head.
You are the endless scenery
behind the tense sinewy elegance of his two dark legs.
You welcome him joyfully
and dance.
And you will be the locks in a new canal between continents.
The ship of life will push out of you
and rejoice
in the whiteness,
in the first floating and rising of water.

Kathleen Fraser

Kathleen Fraser moved to New York to work for Mademoiselle magazine before becoming a poet. She taught poetry in San Francisco from the 1970s to 1990s, and lobbied for more women writers to be included on the curriculum. Kathleen founded the American Poetry Archives and edited the journal HOW(ever) that supported women's writing between 1983 and 1991. She divides her time between San Francisco and Rome.

saltwater

"Everyone who terrifies you is 65% water.
And everyone you love is made of stardust,
and I know
sometimes
you cannot breathe deeply, and
the night sky is no home, and
that you are down to your last two percent,
but
nothing is infinite,
not even loss.
You are made of the sea and the stars, and
one day,
you are going to find yourself again."

Finn Butler

Finn Butler is a writer and musician. Originally from London, she now lives and works in Japan. Her first poetry collection, *From The Wreckage*, was published in 2014.

Warning

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tried
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.

I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only eat bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

Jenny Joseph

Jenny Joseph worked as a lecturer, journalist, cleaner, pub landlady and anti-apartheid publisher in South Africa as well as writing poetry and children's books. She wrote 'Warning' about aging disgracefully when she was only twenty-eight and it became enormously popular, being printed on tea towels and inspiring its fans to establish a Red Hat Society. She admitted to mixed feelings about its runaway success, but her many other poems are now also widely enjoyed.

Not Waving but Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

Stevie Smith

Christened Florence, Stevie got her nickname from the jockey Steve Donoghue because she was so small. She was mostly brought up by her beloved, fiercely independent aunt (whom she nicknamed 'Lion') and remained single, saying marriage looked rather tiring. Stevie published poems illustrated with her own quirky doodles and rather autobiographical novels in which friends – including George Orwell, with whom she may have had an affair – thought they recognised themselves. She was fascinated by death and religion and her lively readings won her fans including Sylvia Plath, who called herself a 'desperate Smith-addict'. Though she often suffered from ill health and sadness, she had a mischievous sense of dark humour that shows in her poems.