



The Triptych

Fiction, Verse, Essay

QUARTER ONE

Each day, a short story, a poem and an essay that share a thread: a theme, a time and place, or a conversation between them. Then a short afterword on the three together. Most days take about twenty-two minutes; the last day of each week is longer.

Week One

DAY ONE

Freedom

22 minutes

The Bet

STORY · Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett, 1889 · 11 minutes

At a party, a banker bets a young lawyer two million roubles that he cannot stand fifteen years of solitary confinement.

Invictus

POEM · William Ernest Henley, 1888 · 1 minute

Written in an Edinburgh hospital by a young man who had already lost one leg to tuberculosis and was fighting to keep the other.

Meditations, Book II

ESSAY · Marcus Aurelius, translated by George Long, c. 175 · 9 minutes

The private notebook of a Roman emperor, written on campaign on the Danube frontier, telling himself how to face the day: "Begin the morning by saying to thyself ..."

Marcus Aurelius was Roman emperor from 161 to 180 and spent much of his reign at war on the Danube frontier. In camp he kept notes to himself in Greek, never meant for anyone else; they were later published as the *Meditations*. Book II was written at Carnuntum, a Roman army base on the Danube.

AFTERWORD

Day One: Freedom

Fifteen years of reading bring the lawyer to something like Marcus Aurelius's lesson, that money and the world's good things are worth nothing. But he gets there through contempt: he despises "freedom and life and health" and everyone who lives by them. Marcus reaches the same place without the scorn, because "we are made for cooperation".

So who won the bet? The banker keeps his millions, and goes home feeling "so great a contempt for himself". The lawyer walks out owing nothing and owning nothing, into a world he despises. Henley's last lines, "I am the master of my fate: / I am the captain of my soul", are the claim both men are testing. Could either of them say it? Could Marcus, who warns himself against being "pulled by the strings like a puppet"?

Henley's friend Robert Louis Stevenson told him that the sight of his "maimed strength and masterfulness" gave him Long John Silver, the one-legged pirate of Treasure Island. Nelson Mandela recited *Invictus* to his fellow prisoners on Robben Island. And Marcus is the old emperor at the start of *Gladiator*: the film opens on the war he was fighting as he wrote these notes.

DAY TWO

Revenge

12 minutes

The Cask of Amontillado

STORY · Edgar Allan Poe, 1846 · 10 minutes

'The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could': a nobleman in carnival season invites his enemy to taste a rare wine.

A Poison Tree

POEM · William Blake, 1794 · 1 minute

Blake's four stanzas on what happens to anger that is kept quiet.

Of Revenge

ESSAY · Francis Bacon, 1625 · 2 minutes

'Revenge is a kind of wild justice': Bacon's page-long essay on why we should let it go.

AFTERWORD

Day Two: Revenge

Montresor sets himself two rules at the start. He must “punish with impunity”, and the avenger must make himself felt “as such to him who has done the wrong”. He keeps the first: “For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them.” The second is less sure. Fortunato knows who is walling him up, but does he ever learn why? He takes it for “a very good joke”, then begs “For the love of God!”, and never names the insult. Nor does Montresor.

Bacon warns that “a man that studieth revenge, keeps his own wounds green”. Fifty years on, Montresor is still telling the story, to someone “who so well know the nature of my soul”: a priest hearing his confession, perhaps. As the last stone goes in, his heart grows sick, though “it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so.” Was it?

Blake’s speaker has Montresor’s method. He hides his wrath and suns it “with smiles”, as Montresor goes on “to smile in his face”. In Blake’s notebook the poem had another title: “Christian Forbearance”. And the Montresor motto, “Nemo me impune lacessit”, “No one provokes me with impunity”, is a real one: it is Scotland’s royal motto.

DAY THREE

First love

25 minutes

Araby

STORY · James Joyce, 1914 · 9 minutes

A Dublin boy's first infatuation, from *Dubliners*.

To His Coy Mistress

POEM · Andrew Marvell, 1681 · 2 minutes

"Had we but world enough and time": the wittiest seduction in English.

On Falling in Love

ESSAY · Robert Louis Stevenson, 1877 · 14 minutes

The young Stevenson, charming and wise, on the one sensible folly.

AFTERWORD

Day Three: First love

Stevenson says a lover loses his vanity: “Vanity in a merely personal sense exists no longer.” Joyce’s boy, in the darkened bazaar, sees himself “as a creature driven and derided by vanity.” Which of them is right about him? He never tells the girl of his “confused adoration”, and we never even learn her name, though it “was like a summons to all my foolish blood”. Stevenson reckons that “from timidity or lack of opportunity a good half of possible love cases never get so far.”

Marvell’s speaker is not timid. He and Stevenson both feel how short life is, and draw opposite lessons from it. Stevenson passes on the idea that love makes us believe in immortality, “because there seems not to be room enough in life for so great a tenderness.” Marvell sees only “Desarts of vast Eternity”, and “The Grave’s a fine and private place, / But none I think do there embrace.” So hurry.

Stevenson wrote the essay soon after meeting Fanny Osbourne, an American at an artists’ colony in France: ten years older than him, married, and a mother. Two years later he crossed the Atlantic and America, ill and nearly penniless, to reach her in California, and in 1880 they married. Joyce lived on North Richmond Street as a boy, and there really was an Araby: a great bazaar held in Dublin in May 1894, when he was twelve.

DAY FOUR

Coming home from war

14 minutes

Soldier's Home

STORY · Ernest Hemingway, 1925 · 11 minutes

The returning soldier who can no longer say what he feels; Hemingway's iceberg method at its best.

Dulce et Decorum Est

POEM · Wilfred Owen, 1920 · 2 minutes

The war poem, written months before Owen was killed a week before the Armistice.

The title comes from the Roman poet Horace: “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori,” “It is sweet and fitting to die for your country,” a line every British schoolboy of the time knew. Owen was an officer on the Western Front, and drafted the poem in 1917 while recovering from shell shock in a hospital in Scotland.

Finished with the War: A Soldier's Declaration

ESSAY · Siegfried Sassoon, 1917 · 1 minute

A decorated officer refuses to keep fighting; read out in Parliament and printed in The Times.

AFTERWORD

Day Four: Coming home from war

All three pieces are about telling the truth to the people at home. Krebs finds “that to be listened to at all he had to lie”. Sassoon blames the “callous complacency” of a public who “have not enough imagination to realise” what the soldiers suffer. Owen sets out to supply that imagination: “If in some smothering dreams you too could pace / Behind the wagon that we flung him in”. The friend he is talking to began as a real person. An early draft was addressed to Jessie Pope, who wrote cheerful recruiting verses for the newspapers.

Krebs’s mother, we are told, “had made him lie”. But which was the lie: “I don’t love anybody”, or “I didn’t mean it”?

Sassoon was never court-martialled. His friend the poet Robert Graves persuaded the army that he was suffering from shell shock, and he was sent to Craiglockhart, the hospital in Edinburgh where Owen was a patient. They met there in August 1917, and Sassoon read and encouraged Owen’s poems. Then both men, who had called the war a lie, went back to it. Sassoon was wounded in the head in July 1918, and survived. Owen returned to France that autumn and won the Military Cross.

DAY FIVE

Fathers and sons

25 minutes

Mateo Falcone

STORY · Prosper Mérimée, translated by George Burnham Ives, 1829 · 18 minutes

In the Corsican maquis, a bandit on the run begs a herdsman's ten-year-old son to hide him. Mérimée's masterpiece, "in its intensity of effect and in its economy of means" (Arthur Symons).

If—

POEM · Rudyard Kipling, 1910 · 2 minutes

Kipling's rules for becoming a man, addressed to a son, and for a century Britain's favourite poem.

Letter to His Son (9 March 1748)

ESSAY · Lord Chesterfield, 1774 · 6 minutes

The most famous father's advice in English: Chesterfield writes to his teenage son on manners, laughter and how to please.

Lord Chesterfield, a statesman and wit, wrote hundreds of letters of advice to his son Philip, who was fifteen and studying at Leipzig when this one was sent. The letters were published after Chesterfield's death and became famous, and notorious, as a guide to manners.

AFTERWORD

Day Five: Fathers and sons

Adjutant Gamba could have learned his trade from Chesterfield. Threats get him nowhere, so he tries “the power of caresses and gifts”. He aims at the heart, as Chesterfield advises, and finds that “to please is almost to prevail”. Kipling wants a son proof against all that, who can trust himself “when all men doubt you” and whom “neither foes nor loving friends can hurt”. Mateo’s lesson has one rule, and he teaches it once.

Chesterfield’s son Philip was illegitimate, so he could never inherit his father’s title: hence “Your own rank and fortune will not assist you.” The father’s fear that he “may very possibly be out of the world” before the boy made his way came out the other way round. Philip died at thirty-six, four years before his father, who learned only then that his son had secretly married and had two boys of his own. Philip’s widow sold the letters to a publisher. Samuel Johnson said they taught “the morals of a whore, and the manners of a dancing master”.

Kipling had one son, John. When the army turned him down for his poor eyesight, Kipling used his influence to get him a commission in the Irish Guards. John was killed at the Battle of Loos in 1915, his first battle, at eighteen.

DAY SIX

Mishaps

13 minutes

My Financial Career

STORY · Stephen Leacock, 1910 · 4 minutes

'When I go into a bank I get rattled': a young man tries to open an account with fifty-six dollars.

Casey at the Bat

POEM · Ernest Lawrence Thayer, 1888 · 4 minutes

The most famous poem about baseball, first printed in a San Francisco paper and recited in music halls ever since. Mudville is losing in the ninth, and its star is due up.

On Running After One's Hat

ESSAY · G. K. Chesterton, 1908 · 5 minutes

"An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered": Chesterton at his most delightful.

AFTERWORD

Day Six: Mishaps

Chesterton has a use for the other two pieces. The old gentleman chasing his hat in Hyde Park, he says, should be glad of the “rich, almost riotous pleasure” he is giving everyone watching. Leacock’s young man gives the bank exactly that, and as the door swings behind him “a roar of laughter” goes up to the ceiling. Thayer, too, knows who is enjoying Casey’s disaster. The last stanza says “somewhere men are laughing”, and somewhere is wherever the poem is being read. As Chesterton points out, people “run much more eagerly after an uninteresting little leather ball” than after a hat.

When he writes “They also serve who only stand and wait for the two fifteen”, Chesterton is borrowing from Milton, whose sonnet on going blind ends “They also serve who only stand and wait.” And the man who wrote about keeping his savings in a sock was a professor of economics: Leacock taught at McGill University in Montreal for more than thirty years, and wrote his comic pieces on the side.

DAY SEVEN

Cold

A longer day, 37 minutes

To Build a Fire

STORY · Jack London, 1908 · 29 minutes

A man, a dog and seventy-five below zero; one of the most anthologised stories in English.

The story uses one term of its time, for tussocks of marsh grass, that is now a racial slur.

The Cremation of Sam McGee

POEM · Robert W. Service, 1907 · 6 minutes

A Yukon ballad, the kind told round a campfire: Sam McGee from Tennessee was always cold, and on the trail he makes his partner promise to cremate him.

Message to the Public

ESSAY · Robert Falcon Scott, 1913 · 3 minutes

The last public words of Captain Scott, written in a tent on the Antarctic ice, on the way back from the South Pole.

In 1910 Robert Falcon Scott, a captain in the Royal Navy, led a British expedition to Antarctica to be first to the South Pole. He and four companions reached it on foot, hauling their own sledges, on 17 January 1912, and found that the Norwegian Roald Amundsen had beaten them by a month. This message was found in Scott's notebook, in a tent on the return journey.

AFTERWORD

Day Seven: Cold

As he drifts off, London's man pictures getting back to the States, where "he could tell the folks what real cold was". Scott knows he won't get home: "Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell", and so "These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale." Service's narrator has lived to tell his, and makes it as tall as he can.

Scott also wants the tale told his way. The disaster, he begins, was "not due to faulty organisation, but to misfortune". London allows his man no such comfort: "It was his own fault or, rather, his mistake", and the old-timer on Sulphur Creek knew it, and so did the dog. The "second companion" in Scott's message, Captain Oates, had walked out of the tent into a blizzard so as not to slow the others down. Scott's diary gives his last words: "I am just going outside and may be some time."

London had written the story once before, in 1902, for a boys' magazine. In that version the man lives, frostbitten and wiser. Service was a bank clerk in Whitehorse who reached the Yukon years after the gold rush, and took the name Sam McGee from one of the bank's customers.

Week Two

DAY EIGHT

Enough

28 minutes

How Much Land Does a Man Need?

STORY · Leo Tolstoy, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, 1886 · 25 minutes

A Russian peasant boasts that with land enough he would fear not even the Devil, and the Devil is listening behind the stove.

The Things That Make a Happy Life (Epigrams X.47)

POEM · Martial, translated by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, c. 98 · 1 minute

A Roman epigram on the simple happy life, in the Tudor version by the poet who helped bring the sonnet into English.

On Discursiveness in Reading (Letter 2)

ESSAY · Seneca, translated by Richard M. Gummere, c. 63 · 2 minutes

Seneca advises Lucilius to read a few good books well, and adds a thought about who is really poor.

AFTERWORD

Day Eight: Enough

Seneca's letter opens with a warning that has nothing to do with money. To "run hither and thither" and keep "changing your abode" is "the sign of a disordered spirit", and "a plant which is often moved can never grow strong." Pahom moves on and on, from his village to beyond the Volga to the Bashkirs' steppe, and every new place is better than the last until he gets there. Seneca names his trouble exactly: he reckons "not his past gains, but his hopes of gains to come".

Martial's list of what makes a happy life is close to the younger sister's speech at the start: "the quiet mind", and to be "Contented with thine own estate". Pahom heard her from the top of the oven, agreed with every word, and boasted that with land enough he "shouldn't fear the Devil himself". Martial's last line asks for something harder: "Ne wish for Death, ne fear his might."

Neither Seneca nor the man who put Martial into English got the quiet life. Seneca was tutor and adviser to the emperor Nero, and one of the richest men in Rome; in AD 65 Nero ordered him to kill himself, and he did. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, was a first cousin of two of Henry VIII's queens. In 1547, at about thirty, Henry had him beheaded for treason.

DAY NINE

Friends

19 minutes

Tennessee's Partner

STORY · Bret Harte, 1869 · 15 minutes

In a California gold camp of the 1850s, a gambler and the quiet miner the camp only ever calls his partner.

Bret Harte set his stories in the mining camps of the California Gold Rush of the 1850s, where justice was often rough and quick.

Taking Leave of a Friend

POEM · Li Bai, translated by Ezra Pound, c. 750 · 1 minute

Eight lines on parting, in Ezra Pound's version: two horses neighing as the friends go their ways.

Letter to Yuan Zhen

ESSAY · Bai Juyi, translated by Arthur Waley, c. 817 · 4 minutes

Bai Juyi, exiled to a river town, writes at night to Yuan Zhen, the friend he has not seen for three years.

Bai Juyi and the poet Yuan Zhen were lifelong friends, both of them officials who were demoted and sent far from the capital. Lo-t'ien is Bai Juyi's own literary name, and Wei-chih is Yuan Zhen's.

AFTERWORD

Day Nine: Friends

Ezra Pound knew no Chinese. He made his version of Li Bai from the notebooks of the American scholar Ernest Fenollosa, and in it the parting friends bow “over their clasped hands at a distance”, and it’s the horses that call to each other. Much of what these friends feel goes into something else. Tennessee’s Partner comes to plead for Tennessee’s life and talks about the weather: “It’s a hot night.” Bai Juyi’s letter begins in grief, then fills its middle with three consolations, the family round him, the fat fish, the cottage under Incense-Burner Peak, so that his friend won’t worry. Only at the end, with dawn coming, does the grief come back: “This night, this heart—do you know them or not?”

The Partner has a question of his own: “What should a man know of his pardner?” Tennessee ran off with his wife, and the Partner was “the first man to shake his hand” when he came back. At the trial Tennessee laughs at the bag of gold, and his only words to his partner are “Euchred, old man!” Was it the same friendship on both sides? Harte had a famous friendship of his own. In San Francisco in the 1860s he encouraged and edited the young Mark Twain, who said Harte had schooled him into a writer. Later they wrote a play together, quarrelled over it, and Twain never forgave him.

DAY TEN

Revolution

30 minutes

El Verdugo

STORY · Honoré de Balzac, translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley, 1830 · 16 minutes

A Spanish town rises against Napoleon's garrison in 1809, and the French commander imposes a terrible condition on the noble family that led it.

In 1808 Napoleon's armies occupied Spain, and the Spanish rose against them in a long and savage war. Balzac sets his story in a little town on the coast held by a French garrison.

Concord Hymn

POEM · Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1837 · 1 minute

Sixteen lines sung at the dedication of a monument where farmers fired "the shot heard round the world".

On 19 April 1775 British soldiers marched out of Boston to seize the weapons of the Massachusetts militia stored at Concord. Local farmers met them at the town's North Bridge and fired on them: the first day of the American War of Independence. Sixty-two years later a monument was put up at the bridge, and this hymn was sung at its dedication.

The American Crisis, No. 1

ESSAY · Thomas Paine, 1776 · 14 minutes

'These are the times that try men's souls': written as Washington's army retreated across New Jersey, and read aloud to the troops.

Thomas Paine wrote this in December 1776, as Washington's army retreated across New Jersey and the cause of American independence seemed close to collapse; Washington had it read to his troops. "Tories" were Americans loyal to the British king.

AFTERWORD

Day Ten: Revolution

Paine meets a Tory tavern-keeper at Amboy, holding his child by the hand, who says “Well! give me peace in my day.” A generous parent, says Paine, would have said “let it be in my day, that my child may have peace”. Emerson’s farmers dared “To die, and leave their children free”. The Marquis de Leganes asks something else of his children: that four of them die by their brother’s hand, so that the family name goes on. Was he a generous parent?

The general means his bargain to shame the family for ever: Spain “shall forever connect with it the memory of his treachery and his punishment.” Instead the crowd on the terrace gives “A sound of admiration”, and the King makes “El Verdugo” a title of nobility. So who won? Paine had already warned that “even mercy, where conquest is the object, is only a trick of war”.

Paine went on to a second revolution. He was elected to the French National Convention, argued against executing Louis XVI, and was thrown into prison during the Terror, where he only narrowly escaped the guillotine. He died in New York in 1809, and only a handful of people came to his funeral. Ten years later the English writer William Cobbett dug up his bones and took them to England, meaning to build him a memorial there. He never did, and the bones were lost.

DAY ELEVEN

Tall tales

24 minutes

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County

STORY · Mark Twain, 1865 · 11 minutes

The story that made Twain famous: a visitor to a California mining camp asks an old man about an acquaintance, and gets something else entirely.

You Are Old, Father William

POEM · Lewis Carroll, 1865 · 2 minutes

Alice tries to recite a moral poem and it comes out wrong: a young man questions his surprisingly athletic father.

This poem is recited by Alice in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). It parodies a solemn poem by Robert Southey, "The Old Man's Comforts", in which Father William explains that he is healthy in old age because he lived soberly when young.

A Dissertation upon Roast Pig

ESSAY · Charles Lamb, 1822 · 11 minutes

Elia's mock-scholarly account, from an ancient Chinese manuscript, of how mankind discovered roast pork.

AFTERWORD

Day Eleven: Tall tales

Lamb's friend "M.", who read him the Chinese manuscript, was real: Thomas Manning, who went out to China and became the first Englishman to reach Lhasa. Twain's story travelled too. When he found it translated into French, he translated it back into English word for word, to show what the French had done to it.

None of these tellers finishes. Simon Wheeler is called away mid-sentence, and catches the narrator at the door with Smiley's "yeller one-eyed cow". Father William's son asks four questions and gets three answers and a threat: "Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!" Lamb gets as far as the students' debate on whether a pig may be whipped to death for the flavour, and then: "I forget the decision."

And who is fooling whom? The narrator suspects that his friend in the East made up Leonidas W. Smiley just to set Wheeler on him. If so, it's the trick the stranger plays on Jim Smiley, and it works the same way, with a straight face: Wheeler "never smiled", and the stranger just doesn't "see no p'int about that frog". Father William, between answers, tries to sell his son some ointment at "one shilling the box".

DAY TWELVE

Ghosts

26 minutes

The Mezzotint

STORY · M. R. James, 1904 · 18 minutes

A Cambridge museum curator buys an unremarkable engraving of a country house, and looks at it more than once.

The Listeners

POEM · Walter de la Mare, 1912 · 2 minutes

A traveller knocks at a moonlit door in a forest: 'Is there anybody there?'

The Spectator No. 110 (The haunted abbey)

ESSAY · Joseph Addison, 1711 · 6 minutes

Mr. Spectator walks at dusk in a ruined abbey on Sir Roger de Coverley's estate, which the servants believe is haunted.

Sir Roger de Coverley is the old country squire of the Spectator's club, and Mr. Spectator is staying at his house in the country.

AFTERWORD

Day Twelve: Ghosts

M. R. James was a Williams himself. He was director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and wrote his stories to read aloud to friends at Christmas. His Williams knows what a ghost story needs: witnesses. Before he goes to bed he writes out and signs an account of the picture, and next day he has Nisbet and Garwood sign theirs.

Addison rests his belief on the same thing, “this general Testimony of Mankind”, and on living people “whom I cannot distrust in other Matters of Fact”. The professor at the end who says “those Bridgeford people will say anything” is just the man Addison is scolding. Yet Addison, for all his reasoning, also wrote a comedy about a haunted house, *The Drummer*, whose ghost turns out to be a living man in disguise.

De la Mare’s Traveller wants a witness too: “Tell them I came, and no one answered, / That I kept my word”. But who are “them”, what word had he given, and will the listeners pass it on? Here the living man is the strange one, “that voice from the world of men”, and the ghosts are the audience. Williams suspects something like it of his picture: “I rather imagine we’re meant to see the whole thing.”

DAY THIRTEEN

The Civil War

19 minutes

An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge

STORY · Ambrose Bierce, 1890 · 15 minutes

A Confederate planter stands on a railway bridge in northern Alabama with a noose round his neck, and Union soldiers waiting for the order.

Ambrose Bierce fought for the Union in the American Civil War. The story is set in northern Alabama during the war, where Union troops held the railroad.

Beat! Beat! Drums!

POEM · Walt Whitman, 1861 · 2 minutes

Whitman's poem from the first months of the American Civil War, when the drums sounded in every street.

Second Inaugural Address

ESSAY · Abraham Lincoln, 1865 · 3 minutes

Seven hundred words, given as the Civil War was ending, which Lincoln thought the best thing he had written: "With malice toward none, with charity for all".

The American Civil War began in 1861, when eleven Southern slave states left the Union and Lincoln, as President, refused to let them go. By March 1865, when he was sworn in for a second term, the North was close to winning, and more than half a million soldiers had died.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirteen: The Civil War

Frederick Douglass heard the Second Inaugural, and that evening told Lincoln it was “a sacred effort”. Six weeks later Lincoln was shot. It is the speech of a man looking back on a war that went further than anyone meant: “Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained.” Whitman’s drums are from 1861, when the war was a summons that would “Make no parley” and “Mind not the old man beseeching the young man”. Peyton Farquhar is that summons in a man. He longs for “the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction.”

Lincoln asks his hearers to “judge not”. Bierce seems to agree. He gives a slave owner kindly eyes, a loving wife and the most beautiful dream in the story. But he gives him a trap too. Farquhar “assented to at least a part of the frankly villainous dictum that all is fair in love and war”, and the grey-clad soldier who stopped at his gate for water was a Federal scout. Is the story’s charity real, or its last joke?

DAY FOURTEEN

Empire

A longer day, 52 minutes

An Outpost of Progress

STORY · Joseph Conrad, 1897 · 38 minutes

Conrad's own favourite of his stories, and the rehearsal for Heart of Darkness.

This story uses the racial slurs of its time.

Contains the racist language of its period, which the story itself is indicting.

Ozymandias

POEM · Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1818 · 1 minute

The poem about the fate of empires.

Shooting an Elephant†

ESSAY · George Orwell, 1936 · 13 minutes

The essay about empire, from a policeman who hated the job and did it anyway.

Orwell uses the racial language of colonial Burma, including "coolie".

Still in copyright in the US; the Orwell Foundation hosts it legitimately.

AFTERWORD

Day Fourteen: Empire

Laughter runs through all three. Orwell shoots the elephant because “every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.” Conrad’s Director sneers at “those two imbeciles” as the steamer pulls away, and at the end Kayerts, hanging from the cross, is “putting out a swollen tongue at his Managing Director”. Shelley’s sculptor got there first. The stone keeps the king’s “sneer of cold command”, copied by “the hand that mocked them”. Shelley wrote the sonnet in a contest with his friend Horace Smith, who wrote one on the same subject; hardly anyone reads Smith’s.

Orwell says the white man who turns tyrant “wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it”. Out in the desert, Ozymandias’s face is nearly all that is left of him. Carlier, at his outpost, pictures a town there in a hundred years, where “chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first civilized men to live in this very spot!” It is Carlier who straightens the cross over the first agent’s grave, and hangs from it to test it: “Not a move. Oh, I did that properly.”

Week Three

DAY FIFTEEN

Vikings

30 minutes

Thor's Journey to Útgarda-Loki (The Prose Edda)

STORY · Snorri Sturluson, translated by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur, 1220 · 15 minutes

The strongest of the Norse gods sets out with Loki to the land of the giants, in the most famous tale of Snorri's handbook of the old myths.

Snorri Sturluson, an Icelandic chieftain, wrote the Prose Edda about 1220 as a handbook for poets, retelling the old myths of the Norse gods. In this part a Swedish king in disguise, Gangleri, questions three mysterious figures, High, Just-as-High and Third, about the gods. Thor is the god of thunder, and Loki a cunning god who travels with him.

The Lay of Thrym

POEM · Anonymous (Old Norse), translated by Henry Adams Bellows, 1000 · 7 minutes

The funniest poem of the Edda: Thor's hammer has been stolen by a giant, who will give it back only if the goddess Freyja marries him.

Thor is the strongest of the Norse gods, and his hammer their chief defence against the giants. Vingthor and Hlorrithi are other names for Thor; Freyja is the goddess of love, Loki the trickster, and Heimdall the gods' watchman. The poem was written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century, but is probably much older.

The Voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan

ESSAY · Ohthere and Wulfstan, translated by James Ingram, c. 890 · 8 minutes

A Norwegian chieftain at King Alfred's court describes sailing round the top of Norway, and another traveller the Baltic coast, as Alfred had them written down about 890.

King Alfred of Wessex had a Latin history of the world translated into English, and added to it two accounts he had heard from travellers about 890: One, from the far north of Norway, and Wulfstan, who sailed the Baltic. The "Finlanders" are the Sami people; "horse-whales" are walrus.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifteen: Vikings

Ohthere heard plenty of stories from the Biarmians, but “knew not how much truth there was in them, because he had not an opportunity of seeing with his own eyes.” Thor sees everything in Útgard with his own eyes, and none of it is what it seems. The hall is a glove, the hammer-blows fall on a mountain, the cat is the Midgard Serpent and the old nurse is Old Age: “eye-illusions”, Útgarda-Loki calls them. In Thrym’s hall it is the giants’ turn to be fooled, by a bride who eats an ox and eight salmon and whose eyes seem to burn with fire. Loki, who lost his eating match to wildfire itself, wins this round with his tongue: Freyja has fasted eight nights, “So hot was her longing for Jotunheim.”

The god is still with us once a week, since Thursday is Thor’s day. Ohthere’s report is the oldest writing known to name Norway. And Snorri, who kept these stories alive, came to a bad end of his own: caught up in the feuds of Iceland’s chieftains, he was murdered at his farm at Reykholt in 1241, on the orders of the King of Norway.

DAY SIXTEEN

Appearances

21 minutes

The Fly

STORY · Katherine Mansfield, 1922 · 9 minutes

One of Mansfield's last stories and among her finest: an office, an old friend's visit, and a fly.

Richard Cory

POEM · Edwin Arlington Robinson, 1897 · 1 minute

Sixteen lines about the most admired man in town.

On Being Found Out

ESSAY · William Makepeace Thackeray, 1861 · 11 minutes

What if everyone's secrets came out at once? Thackeray's wry Roundabout Paper.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixteen: Appearances

Mansfield wrote the story early in 1922, a little over six years after her only brother, Leslie, was killed in Belgium. Their father, a banker, had lost his only son. She died of tuberculosis the following January, at thirty-four.

Old Woodifield begins the story unable to remember what he came to say, and the whisky brings it back. The boss ends it unable to remember what he had been thinking about, and nothing brings it back. In between he comes close to finding something out about himself. He “had told everybody” that time could make no difference, and now he “wasn’t feeling as he wanted to feel.”

Thackeray’s braggart “expected that I should be found out some day.” The boss sends for fresh blotting-paper instead. Is he lucky, as Thackeray would say, not to be found out? Richard Cory never is. Whatever was wrong, the people on the pavement never learn it. When Simon and Garfunkel made a song of the poem in 1966, their narrator works in Cory’s factory, and even after the gunshot he still wishes he could be Richard Cory.

DAY SEVENTEEN

Courage

28 minutes

A Mystery of Heroism

STORY · Stephen Crane, 1895 · 14 minutes

Pinned down by artillery in the Civil War, a thirsty private keeps talking about the well across the open meadow, until his comrades call his bluff.

We few, we happy few (Henry V, Act IV, Scene 3)

POEM · William Shakespeare, 1599 · 3 minutes

The most famous speech before a battle in English, which soldiers have quoted to each other ever since.

In 1415 the young King Henry V of England invaded France to claim its crown. After weeks of marching and sickness, his small, exhausted army was cornered near the village of Agincourt by a French army several times its size. It is the morning of the battle, 25 October, Saint Crispin's day. Westmoreland is one of his lords.

Pericles' Funeral Oration

ESSAY · Thucydides, translated by Richard Crawley, c. 431 BC · 12 minutes

Pericles honours the first Athenians to die in the war with Sparta by describing the city they died for.

In 431 BC war broke out between Athens and Sparta. At the end of the first year the Athenians held their customary public funeral for those who had died, and Pericles, the city's leading statesman, was chosen to speak. Thucydides, an Athenian who wrote the history of the war, gives the speech as he heard or reconstructed it.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventeen: Courage

Halfway across the meadow, Collins decides he can't be a hero, because "Heroes had no shames in their lives", and he has fifteen borrowed dollars on his conscience, and a mother he used to snap at, who died after he left for the war. Henry and Pericles would both tell him he has it backwards. "Be he ne'er so vile," says Henry, "This day shall gentle his condition." For Pericles, courage in battle is "a cloak to cover a man's other imperfections; since the good action has blotted out the bad."

Both speakers promise that the deed will be remembered too: Crispin's day "shall ne'er go by, / From this day to the ending of the world, / But we in it shall be remembered", and the Athenian dead have "renown which never grows old". Collins's deed ends as a bucket lying empty on the ground. The only man his water reached was the dying officer, and it splashed over his face.

Pericles spoke at the end of the war's first year. The next summer plague broke out in Athens, and Thucydides describes it straight after the speech; Pericles himself died of it two years later, and Athens lost the war. Crane was born six years after the Civil War ended, and had never seen a battle when he wrote this story. He saw several afterwards as a war correspondent, and died of tuberculosis at twenty-eight.

DAY EIGHTEEN

Honour

24 minutes

The Shot

STORY · Alexander Pushkin, translated by T. Keane, 1831 · 20 minutes

In a dull garrison town, a retired officer who shoots better than anyone has never fought the duel everyone expected of him.

To Lucasta, Going to the Wars

POEM · Richard Lovelace, 1649 · 1 minute

A Cavalier's twelve-line goodbye to the woman he is leaving for the English Civil War, with one of the most quoted last lines in the language.

Statement on Impending Duel with Aaron Burr

ESSAY · Alexander Hamilton, 1804 · 4 minutes

Alexander Hamilton, in the days before he is to meet the Vice-President of the United States with pistols, writes down why he will go, and what he means to do there.

Alexander Hamilton had been George Washington's right-hand man in the War of Independence and the first Secretary of the Treasury. For fifteen years he had opposed Aaron Burr, now Vice-President, calling him dangerous and unprincipled. In June 1804 Burr demanded that Hamilton take back something he was reported to have said about him, and when Hamilton would not, challenged him to a duel. Duelling was illegal in New York, so they arranged to meet across the river in New Jersey.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighteen: Honour

Less than six years after *The Shot* appeared, Pushkin was mortally wounded in a duel of his own, with a French-born officer who had been pursuing his wife. He was thirty-seven. Hamilton had lost his eldest son, Philip, nineteen years old, in a duel across the river in New Jersey, three years before he went there himself.

Lovelace makes it sound easy: honour is a rival his lady will come to adore as well. Hamilton found it harder. Second on his list of reasons not to fight is “My wife and children”, and he went anyway, because a man who refused would lose his “ability to be in future useful”. Silvio passes up a sure kill for a reason of the same kind: while his old enemy lives, “I have no right to expose myself to death.”

Both men hold back a shot, or mean to, so that the other man will think. Hamilton resolved to “throw away my first fire”, giving Burr “a double opportunity ... to pause and to reflect”, and hoped Burr’s reasons would “satisfy his own conscience”. Silvio, with the Count at his mercy, says “I leave you to your conscience.” Burr fired, and Hamilton died the next day. His own bullet hit a tree above Burr’s head; whether he meant it to is still argued.

DAY NINETEEN

Disaster

25 minutes

The Eruption of Vesuvius (Letters VI.16 and VI.20)

STORY · Pliny the Younger, translated by William Melmoth (revised by F. C. T. Bosanquet), c. 106 · 11 minutes

The only eyewitness account of the eruption that buried Pompeii, written years later by a man who was eighteen at the time, in two letters to the historian Tacitus.

Mount Vesuvius erupted in AD 79, burying Pompeii and Herculaneum. Pliny's uncle, Pliny the Elder, author of an encyclopaedia of natural history, was in command of the Roman fleet at Misenum, across the bay. Years later the historian Tacitus asked the nephew how his uncle had died.

The Convergence of the Twain

POEM · Thomas Hardy, 1912 · 1 minute

Hardy's poem on the Titanic at the bottom of the sea, and the iceberg that was growing for it all along.

The Titanic, the largest and most luxurious ship of its day, struck an iceberg on her maiden voyage in April 1912 and sank with the loss of about fifteen hundred lives.

On Some Mental Effects of the Earthquake

ESSAY · William James, 1906 · 12 minutes

The psychologist was at Stanford when the San Francisco earthquake struck, and he describes his own first reaction, and everyone else's.

The San Francisco earthquake and fire of April 1906 destroyed much of the city. William James, the philosopher and psychologist, was teaching for a term at Stanford University, thirty-five miles away, and went into the city the same day.

AFTERWORD

Day Nineteen: Disaster

Volcanologists still call an eruption like this one “Plinian”, after these letters: a column of gas and ash shooting miles into the sky and spreading out at the top, like the young Pliny’s pine tree.

Eighteen centuries later, William James explained the comfort Pliny found in the dark, that “miserable, though mighty, consolation” of “perishing with the world itself”. “The cutting edge of all our usual misfortunes,” James decided, “comes from their character of loneliness.” He also caught himself treating the earthquake as a living thing with a purpose, and saw why people once took such disasters as “supernatural warnings or retributions”. Hardy gives his disaster a purpose too: an “Immanent Will” that prepared the iceberg as the ship’s “sinister mate”.

James had one more thought: that “the pathetic way of feeling great disasters belongs rather to the point of view of people at a distance”. Hardy wrote from a distance, and would have none of it. Not one of the drowned appears in his poem, only mirrors, jewels, the sea-worm and the moon-eyed fishes. What does the poem gain by leaving them out, and what does it lose?

DAY TWENTY

Young and foolish

32 minutes

Ukridge's Dog College

STORY · P. G. Wodehouse, 1923 · 27 minutes

Stanley Featherstonehaugh Ukridge, who borrows his friends' tobacco, socks and shirts, has a plan to make his fortune at last, and it starts with his aunt's Pekingese.

When I was one-and-twenty (A Shropshire Lad, XIII)

POEM · A. E. Housman, 1896 · 1 minute

Sixteen lines about advice a young man was given and didn't take.

Of Age

ESSAY · Michel de Montaigne, translated by Charles Cotton, 1580 · 4 minutes

Montaigne, nearing forty, argues that a man's mind is at its full strength by twenty, and that most great deeds are done before thirty.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty: Young and foolish

Montaigne would have approved of Ukridge, up to a point. Here at last is a young man who won't give up his life to "childhood, idleness, and apprenticeship", or wait until thirty to be trusted "to determine a dispute about a gutter". And Montaigne's proverb, that a thorn which doesn't prick at birth will hardly ever prick at all, fits a boy expelled for visiting the fair in scarlet whiskers, a false nose and his school cap. Housman's young man needed only a year to find out the wise man was right. Will Ukridge ever reach two-and-twenty?

None of the three writers was young. Montaigne began his Essays after retiring, at thirty-eight, to the tower of his château, and was still adding to them when he died at fifty-nine, so by his own reckoning he did his great work too late. Housman paid to have *A Shropshire Lad* printed in 1896, the year he turned thirty-seven. And Wodehouse first wrote about Ukridge at twenty-four, in his novel *Love Among the Chickens*, and came back to him past forty for these stories.

DAY TWENTY-ONE

The hunt

A longer day, 51 minutes

The Most Dangerous Game

STORY · Richard Connell, 1924 · 32 minutes

A famous big-game hunter falls overboard in the Caribbean at night and swims for an island that sailors are afraid of.

Hurt Hawks

POEM · Robinson Jeffers, 1928 · 2 minutes

A Californian poet, who built his own stone house above the Pacific, and a red-tailed hawk with a broken wing.

Higher Laws (Walden, Chapter 11)

ESSAY · Henry David Thoreau, 1854 · 17 minutes

Thoreau, who hunted and fished as a boy, on the wildness he still feels in himself, and what hunting is good for in a young man's life.

From 1845 to 1847 Henry David Thoreau lived alone in a one-room cabin he had built by Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. Walden (1854) is his account of those years.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-One: The hunt

Thoreau tells anxious parents to let their boys hunt: “make them hunters, though sportsmen only at first, if possible, mighty hunters at last, so that they shall not find game large enough for them in this or any vegetable wilderness—hunters as well as fishers of men.” He means they will grow out of the gun, as he did. General Zaroff, given his first gun at five, took the advice the other way. He found no game large enough, and went looking for men.

“The hare in its extremity cries like a child,” Thoreau writes. The first thing Rainsford hears from the island is the reverse: a scream like “the sound of an animal in an extremity of anguish and terror”, and we soon guess whose it was. Rainsford sets out asking “Who cares how a jaguar feels?” and ends up knowing “how an animal at bay feels”. Jeffers would “sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk”, and Zaroff reckons a thoroughbred horse or hound “worth more than a score” of the sailors he hunts. How far apart are they?

The first film of the story, in 1932, was shot alongside *King Kong*, by the same producers, on the same jungle sets, with Fay Wray running for her life in both.

Week Four

DAY TWENTY-TWO

Hunger

28 minutes

Rashōmon

STORY · Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, 1915 · 11 minutes

A servant, a ruined gate, and the moment he decides what kind of man to be.

Rashōmon was the great southern gate of Kyoto, the capital of Japan, in the Heian period, roughly 800 to 1200. Akutagawa sets his story in a time when the city had been ruined by disasters and the gate had become a place where unclaimed bodies were left.

The Song of the Shirt

POEM · Thomas Hood, 1843 · 3 minutes

Printed anonymously in *Punch*, Hood's poem for a London seamstress paid starvation wages was sung in the streets.

Thomas Hood's poem appeared anonymously in *Punch* at Christmas 1843, after a London court case about a seamstress who had pawned the cloth she was paid a pittance to sew. It was sung, printed on handkerchiefs and quoted in Parliament.

A Modest Proposal

ESSAY · Jonathan Swift, 1729 · 14 minutes

The most savage satire in English, on Irish poverty and English indifference.

By 1729 Ireland was ruled from London, much of its land was owned by landlords who lived in England, and its poor were starving after years of bad harvests. Swift, the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin and the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, published this as an anonymous pamphlet.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Two: Hunger

Hood's seamstress names the bargain all three pieces turn on: "O, God! that bread should be so dear, / And flesh and blood so cheap!" Swift's proposer prices the flesh at ten shillings "for the carcass of a good fat child". Up in the gate the old woman lives off the dead, as the dead woman did before her, selling chopped-up snakes as dried fish. "The samurai had found her dried fish tasty."

Her excuse is the proposer's argument in a plainer voice: it "must be done or she would starve", so it can't be called bad. The lackey only has to turn it round on her. Akutagawa found the story in the *Konjaku Monogatari*, a collection of tales some nine hundred years old. There the man who climbs the gate is already a thief, come to the capital to steal. The snake-seller is from another tale in the same book. What Akutagawa added was the change of heart: a man who would "unhesitatingly" have chosen starvation becomes, in the time it takes to hear one excuse, a man who can't imagine it.

"The famous Psalmanaazor", who put the idea into the proposer's friend's head, was real: a European, probably French, who passed himself off in London as a native of Formosa (now Taiwan) and wrote a book of invented Formosan customs. He later owned up, and in old age became a friend of Samuel Johnson.

DAY TWENTY-THREE

Paying too much

16 minutes

The Necklace

STORY · Guy de Maupassant, 1884 · 12 minutes

Maupassant's best-known story, about a clerk's wife who longs for a grander life.

The World Is Too Much with Us

POEM · William Wordsworth, 1807 · 1 minute

"Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers": the sonnet against busyness.

The Whistle

ESSAY · Benjamin Franklin, 1779 · 3 minutes

Franklin, at seventy-three, remembers spending all his pocket money on a whistle when he was seven, and sees the same bargain being made all around him.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Three: Paying too much

Maupassant knew the Loisels' world from the inside. For most of his twenties he was a clerk, first at the Ministry of the Navy and then at the Ministry of Education, writing in his spare time under the eye of his mentor, Flaubert. Franklin's "dear friend" was Madame Brillon, a gifted musician and his neighbour at Passy, outside Paris, where he was the American envoy, sent to win France's help in the Revolutionary War. He wrote light pieces like this one to amuse her.

So what was Mathilde's whistle? Not the ball, perhaps. Franklin's "reflection gave me more chagrin than the whistle gave me pleasure", but ten years on she still sits by the window and thinks "of that evening long ago", when she was so admired. The costly part was the letter the Loisels sent the next day, saying the clasp was being mended, rather than own up to a loss. An honest one would have cost them five hundred francs at most: a hundred more than her dress. Wordsworth would say she had paid long before she borrowed the necklace, in years of longing for things: "We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!"

Yet she ends smiling "in proud and innocent happiness". The debt is paid, and she paid it. Did she give too much for her whistle, or did those ten years buy her something Franklin would count?

DAY TWENTY-FOUR

Animals

24 minutes

Tobermory

STORY · Saki (H. H. Munro), 1909 · 11 minutes

At an English country-house party, a guest announces that he has taught the host's cat to speak.

Snake

POEM · D. H. Lawrence, 1923 · 4 minutes

A snake comes to the water-trough, and the poet throws a log at it.

My Friend the Pig

ESSAY · W. H. Hudson, 1919 · 9 minutes

The great naturalist, raised on the pampas of Argentina, on the animal he thought the most intelligent of all, and one he got to know rather well.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Four: Animals

All three animals find a voice. Tobermory talks, the pig says “something like ‘Thank-you’ in a series of gentle grunts”, and Lawrence “longed to talk to him”. And all three are marked for death. Tobermory has had the run of the balustrade outside the guests’ bedrooms, so out comes the strychnine. Lawrence’s “voice of my education” says “He must be killed”, and though he feels “so honored” by his guest, he throws the log. Hudson’s pig is “under sentence of death”, though “he had done no wrong”, and Hudson, who is fond of him, is fond of rashers too.

Only Lawrence is sorry. “I thought of the albatross”: in Coleridge’s *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a sailor shoots the albatross that has followed his ship, his shipmates hang the dead bird round his neck, and ever after he is driven to tell the story to strangers. Lady Blemley’s grief runs to “an extremely nasty letter to the Rectory about the loss of her valuable pet”.

Hudson grew up on the pampas of Argentina and came to England only in his thirties. When he died, in 1922, his friends made a bird sanctuary in his memory in Hyde Park, with a stone carving by Jacob Epstein of Rima, the forest girl of his novel *Green Mansions*. It caused an outcry, and it is still there.

DAY TWENTY-FIVE

Rome

8 minutes

The Widow of Ephesus

STORY · Petronius, translated by W. C. Firebaugh, c. 60 · 4 minutes

The oldest story here that still reads like a modern one, told by a passenger to pass the time at sea.

Told within the *Satyricon* (§III–III2), and anthologised alone since antiquity.

Let Us Live, My Lesbia (Catullus 5)

POEM · Catullus, translated by Edward Shepherd Creasy, c. 60 BC · 1 minute

"Give me a thousand kisses": the Roman original of every *carpe diem* love poem.

The Speech of Calgacus (Agricola, 30–32)

ESSAY · Tacitus, translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, c. 98 · 4 minutes

A Roman historian gives the enemy the best lines: a British chief, before the last battle of the conquest of Britain, on what Rome really brings. "They make a solitude and call it peace."

Rome invaded Britain in AD 43 and spent forty years pushing north. In AD 83 or 84 the governor, Agricola, the historian Tacitus's father-in-law, brought the last free tribes of Caledonia (now Scotland) to battle at a place called Mons Graupius. Tacitus, who wrote his father-in-law's life, imagines what the Caledonian leader said to his army before it.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Five: Rome

The maid who talks her mistress back to life sounds like Catullus. She urges her to “enjoy the blessings of light while you can”, and Catullus tells Lesbia the same: the sun will rise again, “But we, when life’s short daylight dies, / In endless night must close our eyes.” Her best lines are borrowed, though. “Think you the ashes or sepultured dead can feel aught of thy woe” and “Why will you fight with a passion that to you is pleasure” come from Virgil’s Aeneid, where Queen Dido’s sister talks her, a widow sworn to her dead husband, into loving Aeneas. It ends with Dido on a funeral pyre.

Tacitus doesn’t pretend Calgacus won. Agricola held his legions back and fought with auxiliaries, Batavians and Tungrians from the Low Countries: the kind of men Calgacus expected to change sides. By Tacitus’s count about ten thousand Caledonians died, and 360 of Agricola’s men. The next day, he writes, there was silence everywhere, the hills deserted, houses smoking in the distance.

Most scholars think the story’s author is the Petronius whose death Tacitus describes: Nero’s arbiter of elegance, the judge of taste at court. When Nero turned against him, he cut his veins, bound them up and opened them again at leisure, listening to friends recite light verse. Before he died he wrote out Nero’s debaucheries, with the names of his partners, and sent the list, sealed, to the emperor.

DAY TWENTY-SIX

Night walks

30 minutes

Wakefield

STORY · Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1835 · 14 minutes

A man steps out of his marriage and lives on the next street for twenty years; Borges called it one of the best stories ever written.

Acquainted with the Night

POEM · Robert Frost, 1928 · 1 minute

Frost's terza-rima sonnet of a man walking city streets alone at night.

Night Walks

ESSAY · Charles Dickens, 1860 · 15 minutes

Dickens, unable to sleep, walks London from midnight to dawn; the founding text of night-time city writing.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Six: Night walks

Each walker hears a cry. On his first night away, Wakefield “heard a voice shouting afar, and fancied that it called his name”, though no one had noticed him go. Frost’s cry comes “over houses from another street, / But not to call me back or say good-bye”. Dickens’s rises at his feet, from a ragged youth on the steps of St. Martin’s, who twists out of his rags and leaves them in Dickens’s hands “like the young man in the New Testament”. That young man is in St Mark’s Gospel: he was following Jesus on the night of his arrest, and when they seized him he left his linen cloth in their hands and fled naked.

And each hears a clock. Dickens’s church bell “may be at first mistaken for company”, until the sound spreads out and “the sense of loneliness is profounder”. Frost’s clock, lit up against the sky, says only that “the time was neither wrong nor right”. Wakefield’s own clock has stopped: twenty years seem “scarcely longer than the week” he first meant to stay away.

Hawthorne tells us on the first page that Wakefield came home and “became a loving spouse till death”. Then, at the door, he leaves him: “We will not follow our friend across the threshold.” So what did Mrs. Wakefield say?

DAY TWENTY-SEVEN

Seeing

12 minutes

Gyges and the Wife of Candaules

STORY · Herodotus, translated by A. D. Godley, c. 430 BC · 4 minutes

The first great story in Western history-writing: a Lydian king who is too proud of his wife's beauty.

Candaules was king of Lydia, a rich kingdom in what is now western Turkey, ruling from its capital, Sardis, around 700 BC.

Histories I.8–13, read alone since antiquity; I.7 is a royal genealogy, left out.

Hymn to Aphrodite

POEM · Sappho, translated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, c. 600 BC · 1 minute

The only complete poem by the greatest lyric poet of antiquity.

Higginson's 1871 version, as collected in E. M. Cox's *The Poems of Sappho* (1924).

Higginson was also Emily Dickinson's editor and correspondent.

A newer translation: Anne Carson, If Not, Winter (Vintage, 2003)

The Allegory of the Cave (Republic, Book VII)

ESSAY · Plato, translated by Benjamin Jowett, c. 375 BC · 7 minutes

Prisoners mistake shadows for reality; the most famous image in Western philosophy.

From Plato's *Republic*, written in Athens around 375 BC. The “I” telling it is Plato's teacher Socrates, talking with a young man called Glaucon (Plato's brother), who mostly agrees with him.

Republic 514a–518b, the passage traditionally read alone.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Seven: Seeing

Glaucon, who agrees with Socrates all through the cave, tells a story of his own earlier in the Republic: the ring of Gyges. A Lydian shepherd finds a gold ring that makes him invisible. He goes to court, seduces the queen, kills the king with her help and takes the throne. Glaucon's question is whether anyone would stay honest if no one could see him. Herodotus's Gyges has no ring. His whole trouble is being seen, once, by the one person who was not meant to see him, and she gives him "two roads", with a death at the end of each.

Sappho is seen too. The goddess comes, smiling, and teases her a little: "Who has harmed thee? / O my poor Sappho!" In the Greek, the sixth stanza ends on a word meaning "unwilling", and it has a feminine ending: the one Sappho loves is a woman. Higginson made her a "he". The poem survives whole only because, more than five hundred years after Sappho, the Greek critic Dionysius of Halicarnassus copied it into a book on style as a model of smooth, polished writing.

Plato wrote the cave some twenty-five years after Athens had put his teacher to death. When he has Socrates say that the prisoners would kill the man who came back to free them, Plato is not guessing.

DAY TWENTY-EIGHT

Deduction

A longer day, 51 minutes

The Red-Headed League

STORY · Arthur Conan Doyle, 1891 · 37 minutes

A London pawnbroker brings Sherlock Holmes an absurd story about a newspaper advertisement, a well-paid job for red-headed men only, and copying out an encyclopaedia.

Ode on Man ('Wonders are many')

POEM · Sophocles, translated by R. C. Jebb, c. 441 BC · 2 minutes

The chorus from *Antigone* on the wonder and danger of human cleverness, one of the most quoted passages in Greek tragedy.

This ode is sung by the chorus of old men of Thebes in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* (about 441 BC). King Creon has forbidden anyone, on pain of death, to bury the body of Polyneices, who died attacking the city, and a guard has just reported that someone has defied the order and sprinkled dust on the corpse.

The Method of Scientific Investigation

ESSAY · Thomas Henry Huxley, 1863 · 13 minutes

From a lecture to working men in London: science, Huxley says, is only the reasoning you already use when you come downstairs and find the teapot gone.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Eight: Deduction

Jabez Wilson, once Holmes has explained himself, could be one of Huxley's working men: "I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it after all." Holmes begins to think he makes "a mistake in explaining", and quotes "Omne ignotum pro magnifico". It is Tacitus's, from the speech of Calgacus: "the unknown always passes for the marvellous". Huxley sets out to spoil the marvel on purpose. He wants his listeners to find that they already reason like Newton, and "be delighted with yourselves".

Sophocles' chorus would put John Clay and Holmes in the same verse: "Cunning beyond fancy's dream is the fertile skill which brings him, now to evil, now to good." Clay has Eton, Oxford and royal blood, and spends them on a tunnel. Jebb's "wonderful" stands for a Greek word, *deinos*, that also means terrible. And the chorus doesn't yet know whom it is condemning: "Never may he share my hearth". Moments later the guard brings in the rule-breaker. It is Antigone, the king's own niece.

Doyle modelled Holmes on Joseph Bell, a surgeon who taught him at Edinburgh and liked to tell patients their jobs and travels before they had said a word. In 1927 Doyle picked this story as the second best of his Holmes stories, after *The Speckled Band*. He was careless with the dates, though: the advertisement appeared on April 27, "just two months" before the League was dissolved, on October 9.

Week Five

DAY TWENTY-NINE

Comedy

27 minutes

The Ransom of Red Chief

STORY · O. Henry, 1907 · 17 minutes

Two kidnappers versus one boy; the funniest story in American literature.

The boy plays at cowboys and Indians, and this story uses the racial slurs of its time.

Résumé

POEM · Dorothy Parker, 1926 · 1 minute

Eight lines of the blackest comedy in American verse.

On Being Idle

ESSAY · Jerome K. Jerome, 1886 · 10 minutes

The comic classic on doing nothing.

AFTERWORD

Day Twenty-Nine: Comedy

“Idleness, like kisses, to be sweet must be stolen,” says Jerome, and Red Chief is the proof. A night in a cave with two crooks is the best holiday of his life because it is stolen from school (“I hate to go to school,” he says, twice), and the worst thing his kidnappers can threaten him with is home.

The cleverest crook in the story may be Ebenezer Dorset, “a mortgage fancier and a stern, upright collection-plate passer and forecloser”, who turns a kidnapping into a sale and gets paid for it. Bill, counting out the money, calls him a thorough gentleman and “a spendthrift for making us such a liberal offer”.

O. Henry knew crooks from the inside. As William Sydney Porter, a bank teller in Texas, he was convicted of embezzlement and spent three years in the Ohio penitentiary, where he began publishing stories as O. Henry. Dorothy Parker’s eight lines were no pose: she tried to kill herself more than once, and lived to be seventy-three. She left everything she had to Martin Luther King Jr.

DAY THIRTY

Daughters

28 minutes

The Cabuliwallah

STORY · Rabindranath Tagore, 1892 · 12 minutes

Tagore's best-loved story, a friendship between a Calcutta child and an Afghan fruit-seller.

A Prayer for My Daughter

POEM · W. B. Yeats, 1921 · 4 minutes

Yeats, a father for the first time at fifty-three, walks and prays for an hour beside his baby's cradle while a storm comes in off the Atlantic.

Yeats wrote this poem in 1919, a few months after his daughter Anne was born, at the old stone tower he had bought in the west of Ireland. Helen is Helen of Troy; "that great Queen, that rose out of the spray" is Venus, goddess of love, born from the sea and married to Vulcan, the lame smith of the gods. The "loveliest woman born" is usually taken to be Maud Gonne, whom Yeats had loved for thirty years and who had given her life to Irish politics.

Consolation to His Wife

ESSAY · Plutarch, translated by A. R. Shilleto, c. 90 · 12 minutes

Plutarch, away from home when he hears their little daughter has died, writes to his wife.

Plutarch, a Greek writer best known for his Lives of famous Greeks and Romans, lived with his wife Timoxena in the small town of Chaeronea, in central Greece, in the first century AD.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty: Daughters

Tagore was the first writer from outside Europe to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1913, and songs of his are the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh. Plutarch spent his last decades as a priest at Delphi; his *Lives*, in an Elizabethan translation, gave Shakespeare the stories of Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra. And the baby in Yeats's cradle, Anne, grew up to be a painter.

Three fathers, and each has a view on ceremony. Yeats wants it for his daughter: "How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?" Plutarch wants none of it. He tells his wife to do as she wishes "without ceremoniousness or superstition", and is proud that she put on no mourning and spent nothing on show. And the father in Calcutta, on his own daughter's wedding day, gives up the electric lights and the military band so that another father can go home to his.

DAY THIRTY-ONE

Egypt of the pharaohs

25 minutes

The Tale of Two Brothers

STORY · Anonymous (Ancient Egyptian), translated by W. M. Flinders Petrie, c. 1200 BC · 16 minutes

Two brothers farm together in the Nile valley until the younger one's honesty sets off a chain of marvels.

The Great Hymn to the Aten

POEM · Akhenaten, translated by James Henry Breasted, c. 1340 BC · 7 minutes

A pharaoh's hymn to the sun disc, the one god he tried to make Egypt worship; its praise of creation has often been compared to Psalm 104.

Akhenaten ruled Egypt in the fourteenth century BC. He turned from the many old gods to a single one, the Aten, the disc of the sun, and built a new capital at Amarna, where this hymn was carved on the wall of a tomb. After his death the old gods were restored and his name was cut from the monuments. The headings are the translator's.

The Instruction of Kagemni

ESSAY · Kagemni, translated by Battiscombe Gunn, c. 2400 BC · 2 minutes

A few paragraphs of a vizier's advice to his children, mostly about eating and speaking, from one of the oldest books in the world.

The papyrus that holds this text is nearly four thousand years old, and its beginning is lost: what survives opens partway through an old vizier's advice to his children. The kings named at the end, Heuni and Senforu, ruled Egypt before the Great Pyramid was built.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-One: Egypt of the pharaohs

The Two Brothers is crowded with gods. The Nine Gods walk the land and take pity on Bata, Khnumu shapes him a wife, the seven Hathors foretell her death, and the scribe signs off by asking Tahuti to strike anyone who speaks against his roll. This is the heaven Akhenaten tried to empty. His hymn praises a “sole God, whose powers no other possesseth”, whom no one knows “Save thy son Ikhnaton”. The old gods won. The boy who came to the throne soon after Akhenaten was named Tutankhaten, “living image of the Aten”; a few years later he was Tutankhamun, named for the old god Amun instead.

Kagemni’s King Senforu was the father of Khufu, who built the Great Pyramid, so his advice was old even to the scribe who wrote down the brothers’ tale. He promises that “the innermost chamber openeth unto the man of silence.” Bata keeps silent: he swears to tell no one what his brother’s wife said to him. But she speaks first, and nearly gets him killed. Readers of the Bible will know her. In Genesis, Potiphar’s wife makes the same offer to Joseph, and tells the same lie when he refuses.

DAY THIRTY-TWO

On the road

27 minutes

The Student

STORY · Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett, 1894 · 6 minutes

Chekhov's own favourite among his stories, and only five pages long.

Ulysses

POEM · Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1842 · 4 minutes

"To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield": the old hero sets out once more.

Ulysses (in Greek, Odysseus) is the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, who spent ten years fighting at Troy and ten more getting home to his small island kingdom of Ithaca, his wife and his son Telemachus. Tennyson imagines him years after his return: old, king again, and restless.

On Going a Journey

ESSAY · William Hazlitt, 1822 · 17 minutes

"One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey; but I like to go by myself."

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Two: On the road

Hazlitt turned twenty on the day in April 1798 when he walked into the valley at Llangollen and saw “liberty, genius, love, virtue” written across his future. Chekhov’s student is twenty-two when he climbs the hill to his village and life seems “enchanted, marvellous, and full of lofty meaning.” Hazlitt tells us what became of his vision: the four words “have since faded into the light of common day.” Chekhov stops before we find out. Will the student’s last?

Ulysses, an old man setting out once more, was written by a young one. Tennyson was twenty-four, and grieving for his closest friend, Arthur Hallam, who had died suddenly at twenty-two. The closing lines turn up in the Bond film *Skyfall*, read by Judi Dench’s M, but Tennyson said the poem first came out of that loss: it gave his feeling about the need to go forward and brave the struggle of life.

DAY THIRTY-THREE

Thieves

25 minutes

The Stolen Bacillus

STORY · H. G. Wells, 1894 · 10 minutes

A London scientist shows a pale, nervous visitor a tube of cholera germs under his microscope, enough to poison a city.

The Highwayman

POEM · Alfred Noyes, 1906 · 7 minutes

"The highwayman came riding—riding—riding—": the galloping ballad of an outlaw and the landlord's daughter, learned by heart by generations of schoolchildren.

The Pears (Confessions, Book II, 4–10)

ESSAY · Augustine of Hippo, translated by E. B. Pusey, c. 398 · 8 minutes

In Thagaste, in Roman Africa, a sixteen-year-old and his friends steal pears they don't even want, and the bishop he became asks why.

Augustine grew up in Thagaste, in Roman North Africa, became a famous teacher of rhetoric, and was baptised a Christian at thirty-two; later he was a bishop. His Confessions, written about 397, tell his life as a long prayer addressed to God. These chapters of the second book, often read on their own, remember a night when he was sixteen.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Three: Thieves

Augustine is sure that nobody does wrong for its own sake: “not even Catiline himself loved his own villainies, but something else, for whose sake he did them.” Then he finds the something else in his own theft: the gang. “Alone I had never done it.” Wells’s anarchist doesn’t want a tube of cholera either. What he wants comes out in the cab: “The world should hear of him at last,” and the people who “had always treated him as a man of no importance” would have to take notice.

Ravachol and Vaillant, the bombers he envies, were real; both were guillotined in France, in 1892 and 1894. In February 1894, the year the story appeared, a young French anarchist crossing Greenwich Park with a bomb blew himself up and hurt no one else. Joseph Conrad later turned the case into his novel *The Secret Agent*.

The Highwayman leaves its own question about a thief. Who told King George’s men where to wait? The poem never says. It only tells us that Tim the ostler loved Bess, and listened, “Dumb as a dog”, to the robber’s plans.

DAY THIRTY-FOUR

Jealousy

20 minutes

The Fortune-Teller

STORY · Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, translated by Isaac Goldberg, 1884 · 16 minutes

Brazil's greatest writer on a young man in Rio, a married woman, and a visit to a card-reader.

My Last Duchess

POEM · Robert Browning, 1842 · 3 minutes

A duke shows a visitor round his palace and stops at a portrait of his late wife: the most famous dramatic monologue in English.

Of Suspicion

ESSAY · Francis Bacon, 1625 · 2 minutes

"Suspensions among thoughts are like bats among birds, they ever fly by twilight": one page of Bacon on what suspicion does to a mind.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Four: Jealousy

Bacon's best cure for suspicion is to talk it over, "frankly to communicate them with the party that he suspects." Browning's Duke thinks of doing just that, and decides against it: "E'en that would be some stooping, and I chuse / Never to stoop."

Machado turns the essay around. His suspicious man is the lover, and Camillo's suspicions are right all along. What kills him is ten milreis' worth of comfort, five times the card-reader's usual fee. Bacon's advice is "to account upon such suspicions as true, and yet to bridle them as false"; Camillo, cheered by the cards, treats his as false and walks straight in. And who wrote the anonymous letters? Machado never says.

Browning's Duke is usually taken to be Alfonso II d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, whose young wife died, still in her teens, less than three years after the wedding, amid rumours of poison. A few years later he married a Habsburg princess. Machado, the grandson of freed slaves, became a founder and the first president of the Brazilian Academy of Letters.

DAY THIRTY-FIVE

Dreams

A longer day, 46 minutes

The Dream of a Ridiculous Man

STORY · Fyodor Dostoevsky, translated by Constance Garnett, 1877 · 34 minutes

Dostoevsky's strangest short work: a man on the edge of suicide, and the dream that follows.

Kubla Khan

POEM · Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1816 · 6 minutes

The poem that came in a dream, with Coleridge's preface about the person from Porlock.

On Dreams

ESSAY · Sir Thomas Browne, 1650 · 6 minutes

A fragment by the strangest, most beautiful prose stylist of the 17th century.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Five: Dreams

The ridiculous man and Coleridge wake with the same trouble: the dream was whole, and the words for it are gone. Of the rest, Coleridge kept only “some eight or ten scattered lines and images”; the ridiculous man admits he may have been “forced afterwards to make up the details”. Both end up as the figure at the close of “Kubla Khan”, the man who has tasted paradise and whom everyone backs away from: “Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair!” “Now they call me a madman,” the ridiculous man begins.

The “poet of great and deserved celebrity” who persuaded Coleridge to publish the poem, nearly twenty years after the dream, was Lord Byron. The “anodyne” was opium, to which Coleridge was addicted for much of his life. Dostoevsky had once stood waiting to be shot: in 1849 he and other young radicals were led out before a firing squad, then told at the last moment that the tsar had spared them. The reprieve had been planned all along.

Does it matter that it was only a dream? The ridiculous man says no, and Browne, two centuries earlier, half agrees: dreams may deceive “concerning outward events, yet may they bee truly significant at home, & whereby wee may more sensibly understand ourselves.” What the ridiculous man learns about himself, asleep in his arm-chair, is that he could ruin a paradise single-handed.

Week Six

DAY THIRTY-SIX

The old ways

24 minutes

As It Was in the Beginning

STORY · E. Pauline Johnson, 1899 · 14 minutes

A Mohawk poet's story of a girl taken from her people to a mission school, told in her own fierce voice.

This story uses the racial slurs of its time, which the narrator throws back at the people who use them.

A Prayer of the Night Chant

POEM · Navajo (traditional), translated by Washington Matthews, 1902 · 4 minutes

The Navajo prayer that ends 'It is finished in beauty', recorded by an army surgeon who spent years learning the ceremonies.

This prayer belongs to the Night Chant, a Navajo healing ceremony lasting nine nights, and is said phrase by phrase by the singer and the patient. It was recorded and translated by Washington Matthews, an army surgeon, in the 1890s. The Talking God, the House God, Pollen Boy and Grasshopper Girl are holy beings of the ceremony, and Estsánatlehi, "my mother", is the Navajo goddess of the changing year.

Why I Am a Pagan

ESSAY · Zitkala-Ša, 1902 · 5 minutes

A Yankton Dakota writer, educated by missionaries, explains in the Atlantic Monthly why she prefers the old faith.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Six: The old ways

Esther and Zitkala-Ša were both raised on the missionaries' hell. Esther's mother laughed at it: "If the white man made this Blackcoat's hell, let him go to it." A native preacher comes to warn Zitkala-Ša of "the after-doom of hell fire", and she hears him out and gives him lunch. Esther, home again beside her mother on the buffalo-hide, can't shake it off so easily: "I dream nightly of the horrors of the white man's hell. Why did they teach me of it, only to fling me into it?"

The Night Chant is a prayer for coming home. The rainbow returns with the one praying to the roof, the doorway, the fireside, and everything is "restored": horses, sheep, old men, children, "my country". Esther has come home too. What has been restored to her?

She takes her childhood buckskin dress with her when she goes. Pauline Johnson wore buckskin on stage: she toured Canada, the United States and London reciting her work, in a buckskin outfit for the first half and an evening gown for the second. Zitkala-Ša, whose name means Red Bird, went on to write *The Sun Dance Opera* (1913) with a composer, and founded the National Council of American Indians.

DAY THIRTY-SEVEN

Schooldays

13 minutes

The Last Lesson

STORY · Alphonse Daudet, 1873 · 7 minutes

A boy in Alsace, late for school and dreading a grammar test, finds the village elders sitting in the classroom.

In 1871, after France lost its war with Prussia, the French border province of Alsace became part of the new German Empire.

Anonymous translation from International Short Stories, French (1910), the same text as Wikisource's unsourced "The Last Lesson".

The School Boy

POEM · William Blake, 1794 · 1 minute

Blake's boy loves to rise on a summer morning, and dreads the classroom.

Going Back to School

ESSAY · Max Beerbohm, 1899 · 5 minutes

Beerbohm, young, successful and pleased with himself, passes a small boy in a cab on his way back to school, and remembers.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Seven: Schooldays

Most people in Alsace in 1871 spoke Alsatian, a German dialect, at home; Franz, Hauser and Wachter are German names. M. Hamel's French, "the most beautiful language in the world", was for most Alsations a language learned at school. Alsace went back to France after the First World War, was taken by Germany again in 1940, and was returned in 1945.

Blake's schoolboy is a caged bird: "How can the bird that is born for joy / Sit in a cage and sing?" Franz hears the pigeons on the roof and wonders, "Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?" For M. Hamel the cage is outside the school, and a people who hold fast to their language have "the key to their prison". Blake himself never went to an ordinary school: he was taught at home, and sent at ten to a drawing school.

Franz's books, a nuisance that morning, are by noon "old friends now that I couldn't give up". Beerbohm "burnt all my school-books, when I went up to Oxford", and tells the small, pale boy at length how glad he is to be done with it all. Yet he still knows that he made "exactly fifteen" of those drives back.

DAY THIRTY-EIGHT

Facing death

16 minutes

The Killers

STORY · Ernest Hemingway, 1927 · 12 minutes

Two men in tight overcoats and derby hats walk into a small-town lunch-room at five o'clock and order dinner.

This story uses the racial slurs of its time.

No Coward Soul Is Mine

POEM · Emily Brontë, 1846 · 1 minute

Said to be Brontë's last poem; a fearless creed in the face of death.

Meditation XVII ("No man is an island")

ESSAY · John Donne, 1624 · 3 minutes

Written while Donne lay gravely ill, listening to church bells; "never send to know for whom the bell tolls".

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Eight: Facing death

Thirteen years after this story, Hemingway took the title of a novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, from Donne's meditation. Donne hears the bell for a sick man he doesn't know, and asks "who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?" Henry's lunchroom has three answers. Sam the cook: "I don't even listen to it." George: "you better not think about it." And Nick, who can't stand "to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it", is leaving town.

When Emily Dickinson was buried in 1886, a friend read "No Coward Soul Is Mine" at her funeral; it had been one of her favourite poems. Brontë's courage rests on "The stedfast rock of immortality". Ole Andreson isn't trembling either, but as far as we're told he has nothing to rest on, only "There ain't anything to do now." Is that courage, or has he simply given up? His landlady thinks he just doesn't feel well.

DAY THIRTY-NINE

The desert

29 minutes

A Passion in the Desert

STORY · Honoré de Balzac, translated by Ernest Dowson, 1830 · 22 minutes

A French soldier escapes his captors in the Egyptian desert during Napoleon's campaign and shelters in a cave, which turns out to be a panther's den.

Bedouin Song

POEM · Bayard Taylor, 1853 · 1 minute

'From the Desert I come to thee': the Victorian parlour favourite that imagined the Arabian lover.

Preface to The Desert and the Sown

ESSAY · Gertrude Bell, 1907 · 6 minutes

The traveller and archaeologist explains why she rode out from Jerusalem into the Syrian desert, and why she let the people she met speak for themselves.

AFTERWORD

Day Thirty-Nine: The desert

Gertrude Bell is frank about her politics. “Being English, I am persuaded that we are the people who could best have taken Syria in hand,” she writes, and hopes Britain may yet “recapture the place we have lost.” Within fifteen years Britain had taken much of the region in hand, and Bell with it. In the First World War she worked for British intelligence in Cairo alongside T. E. Lawrence; afterwards she helped draw the borders of the new kingdom of Iraq and make Faisal its king. She founded what is now the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and is buried in the city.

Balzac’s old soldier has fought all over Europe since Egypt, and has seen nothing like the desert: “it is God without mankind.” Bell went for the mankind, for the stories and the talk “round the camp fire”.

“We’re bound together for life and death,” the soldier tells Mignonette, and Taylor’s Bedouin promises a love “that shall not die / Till the sun grows cold”. The man passing on the soldier’s story is cooler: great passions end “by a misunderstanding”. He is telling it, remember, to a woman who has just “made so many promises” to get it out of him. Is it a love story or a warning?

DAY FORTY

Tuscany, 1300–1350

25 minutes

Federigo's Falcon (Decameron V.9)

STORY · Giovanni Boccaccio, translated by J. M. Rigg, 1353 · 10 minutes

A young Florentine spends everything he has courting a lady who will not look at him, until only his falcon is left.

This is one of the hundred tales of Boccaccio's Decameron, told by ten young Florentines who have left the city to escape the plague of 1348. Hawking was a noble sport, and a trained falcon a costly treasure.

Ballata, in Exile ('Because no hope is left me, Ballatetta')

POEM · Guido Cavalcanti, translated by Ezra Pound, 1300 · 2 minutes

Dante's 'first friend', banished from Florence and fearing he will never return, sends his little poem to carry his heart to his lady.

Guido Cavalcanti, the poet Dante called his "first friend", was banished from Florence in 1300 during the city's feuds and died that same year. A ballata is a song in dancing measure; "Ballatetta", little ballad, is the poem itself, which the poet sends to his lady as a messenger.

The Ascent of Mont Ventoux

ESSAY · Petrarch, translated by James Harvey Robinson, 1336 · 14 minutes

Petrarch climbs a mountain in Provence for the view, perhaps the first person to do so for its own sake, and writes to his confessor about the climb.

Petrarch, the Italian poet of the sonnets to Laura, wrote this letter to Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, a friar who had given him a pocket copy of Saint Augustine's Confessions, the book in which Augustine tells how he turned from the world to God. Mont Ventoux is a bare mountain in Provence, near Avignon, where Petrarch lived.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty: Tuscany, 1300–1350

On the summit Petrarch sighs “for the skies of Italy” and longs “to see once more my friend and my country”. He grew up in Provence because his father, a Florentine notary, had been banished in 1302, along with Dante. Two years earlier Dante, as one of the priors who governed Florence, had helped send his friend Cavalcanti into exile. Cavalcanti saw no hope of return, but he did return: sick with malaria caught in exile, he was allowed home that summer, and died in Florence within weeks.

Petrarch says he wrote his letter that night at the inn, “on the spur of the moment”; scholars have long suspected he wrote it years later. His brother, who took the straight path up while Petrarch wandered, became a Carthusian monk. And the mountain is now one of the most feared climbs in the Tour de France: the British rider Tom Simpson died on its slopes in 1967.

Federigo’s falcon was the one thing the sick boy wanted. His mother marries Federigo remembering “the magnificent generosity with which he had finally killed his falcon to do her honour”. The boy died, Boccaccio says, “whether for fretting, that he might not have the falcon, or by the unaided energy of his disorder”. Which does she believe? Federigo, at any rate, lives happily ever after, “keeping more exact accounts”.

DAY FORTY-ONE

Scotland

31 minutes

Thrawn Janet

STORY · Robert Louis Stevenson, 1881 · 18 minutes

Told in broad Scots by a villager: how the young minister of Balweary took on a housekeeper the parish said was a witch.

The tale is told in the Scots of a Lowland village. Thrawn means twisted or crooked; a few other words: deil, devil; kirk, church; manse, the minister's house; sair, sore; ken, know; unco, strange; mutch, a woman's cap; and the Black Man is the Devil.

To a Mouse

POEM · Robert Burns, 1785 · 2 minutes

Burns turns up a mouse's nest with his plough in November, and apologises.

My Own Life

ESSAY · David Hume, 1777 · 12 minutes

Written in a few days as he was dying, Hume's short, cheerful account of his life and his 'ruling passion', the love of literary fame.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-One: Scotland

David Hume was a year old in the summer of Thrawn Janet, 1712. His Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, the book he says was “entirely overlooked and neglected”, holds his famous argument about miracles: when someone reports one, ask which is likelier, that it really happened or that the witness is mistaken or lying. Try it on Balweary. The tale comes fifty years on, from an old man “over his third tumbler”. And the other explanation is in the story too: the young Mr Soulis preached that it was “the folk’s cruelty that had gi’en her a stroke of the palsy”. Which do you believe?

Burns gave John Steinbeck a title, *Of Mice and Men*, but his poem ends somewhere darker: looking forward, he can only “guess and fear”. Hume, writing with death a few months off, has “never suffered a moment’s abatement of my spirits”. That July James Boswell visited him and asked whether the thought of annihilation troubled him. Not in the least, said Hume: no more than the thought that he had not existed before he was born. Boswell went away disturbed. Near the end, his friend Adam Smith reported, Hume amused himself by inventing excuses he might give Charon, the ferryman of the dead, for a little more time, and Charon’s impatient replies.

DAY FORTY-TWO

Retreat from the world

A longer day, 45 minutes

The Miracle of Purun Bhagat

STORY · Rudyard Kipling, 1894 · 22 minutes

A prime minister gives up everything to walk into the Himalayas with a begging bowl.

Returning to the Fields

POEM · Tao Yuanming, translated by Arthur Waley, c. 405 · 1 minute

China's great poet of retirement gives up official life and goes home to his farm.

An Account of My Hut (Hōjōki)

ESSAY · Kamo no Chōmei, translated by Donald Keene, 1212 · 22 minutes

After fire, famine and earthquake in Kyoto, a court poet becomes a monk and moves into a ten-foot hut in the hills.

Kamo no Chōmei was a poet from a family of shrine priests in Kyoto, then the capital of Japan. In the 1170s and 1180s the city suffered a great fire, a whirlwind, famine and earthquake as well as civil war, and in his fifties he became a Buddhist monk. The prayer he recites at the end calls on Amida Buddha, who was believed to welcome the faithful into a paradise in the west.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Two: Retreat from the world

Tao Yuanming left his last post, as a county magistrate, after about eighty days. The story goes that he would not bow to a visiting inspector for five pecks of rice, his salary, and the phrase is still a Chinese byword for refusing to stoop for a living. His retreat is ten acres and a thatched cottage of “eight or nine rooms”. Chōmei’s dwellings shrank “with each remove” until his hut was ten feet square, hinged so that two carts could carry it off; a copy stands today at the Shimogamo Shrine in Kyoto, where his family were priests. Purun Bhagat moves into an empty shrine with an antelope skin, a crutch and a begging-bowl.

But which of them gets furthest from the world? Chōmei is proud of needing nobody: “It is best to be one’s own servant.” Purun Bhagat lives on what the village leaves him each morning, and that debt is what calls him back: “His eye fell on the empty begging-bowl, and his face changed.” For one last night he is “a man accustomed to command” again. Chōmei, with no one to save, can’t even let go of his hut: “It is a sin for me now to love my little hut”.

Week Seven

DAY FORTY-THREE

Before the law

12 minutes

Before the Law†

STORY · Franz Kafka, translated by Ian Johnston, 1915 · 3 minutes

Kafka's parable, two pages long, of a man from the country who comes to the door of the Law and is told by the doorkeeper that he cannot enter yet.

England in 1819

POEM · Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1839 · 1 minute

A sonnet against the king, the princes and the Parliament, written the year of the Peterloo massacre and too dangerous to publish in Shelley's lifetime.

In 1819 George III, old, blind and insane, was still king, though his son the Prince Regent ruled for him. That August cavalry charged a peaceful crowd demanding reform at St Peter's Field in Manchester, killing at least fifteen people. Shelley, living in Italy, wrote this sonnet but could not publish it; it appeared in 1839.

Statement at the Great Trial

ESSAY · Mohandas K. Gandhi, 1922 · 9 minutes

Charged with sedition in 1922, Gandhi explains to the English judge how a loyal subject of the Empire became its uncompromising opponent.

In March 1922 Gandhi, leader of the campaign of non-violent non-co-operation against British rule in India, was tried at Ahmedabad for sedition, for three articles in his weekly paper *Young India*. A few weeks earlier a crowd at Chauri Chaura had set fire to a police station, killing the policemen inside, and Gandhi had called the campaign off. He pleaded guilty and read this statement to the court.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Three: Before the law

“If it tempts you so much,” the gatekeeper tells the man from the country, “try going inside in spite of my prohibition.” He never tries. Gandhi is the man who does. He walks up to the law, admits everything, and tells the judge he has two choices: resign, or give him “the severest penalty”. Shelley’s laws “tempt and slay” too, but his poem, like the man on his stool, can only wait for something to “Burst” from the graves. The judge took a middle way. He gave Gandhi six years, and said no one would be better pleased than he if the government let him out early. It did: Gandhi was released after less than two years, when he fell ill and needed an operation for appendicitis.

Kafka had a law degree and spent his working life in a Prague insurance office. He later set this parable inside his novel *The Trial*, where a priest tells it to the hero, Josef K., and the two argue over what it means. K. is sure the gatekeeper cheated the man; the priest is not so sure. Kafka asked his friend Max Brod to burn his manuscripts after his death. Brod published *The Trial* instead.

DAY FORTY-FOUR

Work

25 minutes

Counterparts

STORY · James Joyce, 1914 · 16 minutes

A Dublin clerk who hates his job, his boss and his copying has a bad afternoon at the office and a long night in the pubs.

Chicago

POEM · Carl Sandburg, 1914 · 2 minutes

"Hog Butcher for the World": the poem that made Sandburg's name, a city of work answering the people who sneer at it.

Labour (Past and Present, Book III, Chapter 11)

ESSAY · Thomas Carlyle, 1843 · 6 minutes

"Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessedness": the Victorian sage's sermon on work.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Four: Work

A counterpart is a duplicate of a legal document, which is what Farrington spends the day failing to make. But the story is full of copies. His feud with Mr. Alleyne began the day he was overheard “mimicking his North of Ireland accent”. In the pub Higgins acts out Alleyne shaking his fist. And at home Farrington mimics his son’s “flat accent” before he takes the stick to him. Who is whose counterpart?

Sandburg’s Chicago is a “tall bold slugger”, laughing “as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle”. Farrington, the big man of the office, loses twice to “a mere boy”, and doesn’t laugh. Carlyle has a cure: the “helldogs” of Indignation and Despair slink off the instant a man “bends himself with free valour against his task”. But his workers are Sir Christopher Wren raising St Paul’s and Columbus crossing the ocean. Would it work on fourteen pages of somebody else’s contract?

Carlyle knew about starting again on a clean sheet. In 1835 he lent the only manuscript of the first volume of his history of the French Revolution to his friend John Stuart Mill, and a servant, taking it for waste paper, burned it. He wrote the whole volume again.

DAY FORTY-FIVE

Murder and guilt

19 minutes

The Tell-Tale Heart

STORY · Edgar Allan Poe, 1843 · 9 minutes

Poe's most famous tale, told by a narrator who insists from the first line that he is not mad.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow (Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5)

POEM · William Shakespeare, 1606 · 3 minutes

The bleakest speech in Shakespeare, given here with the whole short scene around it.

Macbeth, a Scottish general, was told by three witches that he would be king. Urged on by his wife, he murdered King Duncan, a guest asleep in his castle, took the crown, and has killed again and again to keep it. Now an army is marching on his castle at Dunsinane, and Lady Macbeth, sick with guilt, has been walking in her sleep. The witches have promised him he cannot be beaten until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane.

On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth

ESSAY · Thomas De Quincey, 1823 · 7 minutes

A classic of criticism, explaining why one sound effect in Macbeth is so terrifying.

The scene De Quincey means comes early in Macbeth, just after Macbeth has stabbed King Duncan in his sleep. He and his wife are still whispering over the deed in the dark, their hands bloody, when someone begins knocking at the castle gate.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Five: Murder and guilt

The body is under the floor, it is four o'clock, and "there came a knocking at the street door." Poe's murderer gets his own knocking at the gate, and it does what De Quincey says it should. It lets the ordinary world back in, in the shape of three polite officers who "chatted of familiar things", and De Quincey's "pulses of life are beginning to beat again". In Poe's story they beat louder and louder. But whose heart is it?

Poe knew his Macbeth. His narrator aims the lantern "precisely upon the damned spot", Lady Macbeth's phrase as she walks in her sleep. Macbeth himself, by Act V, has gone the other way. Poe's man hears everything "in the heaven and in the earth". Macbeth remembers a time when a "night-shriek" would have chilled him, but he has "supp'd full with horrors", and the cry from inside the castle, which is for his wife's death, "Cannot once start me". William Faulkner took the title of *The Sound and the Fury* from the speech that follows.

DAY FORTY-SIX

Fairy tales

20 minutes

The Juniper Tree

STORY · Brothers Grimm, translated by Margaret Hunt, 1812 · 12 minutes

The darkest of the Grimms' tales, which Tolkien remembered from childhood for its beauty and horror.

The Fairies

POEM · William Allingham, 1850 · 2 minutes

'Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen': the Irish poem that taught generations of children to be wary of the little men.

The Red Angel

ESSAY · G. K. Chesterton, 1909 · 6 minutes

Chesterton defends frightening fairy tales against those who would spare children from them.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Six: Fairy tales

Chesterton says that what a fairy tale gives a child is “a St. George to kill the dragon.” Look for St George in *The Juniper Tree*. No knight comes, and no grown-up saves anyone: the father eats his son and asks for more. The boy rescues himself, dead, as a bird, with nothing but a song, and he charges for every encore: “I’ll not sing it twice for nothing!” Is that Chesterton’s kind of fairy tale, or something stranger?

Allingham’s poem has no St George at all. The fairies keep Bridget, nobody fetches her back, and the people of the glen don’t even dare go hunting. In Ireland this was not only a matter for the nursery. In 1895, in County Tipperary, a man named Michael Cleary burned his wife, Bridget, to death, claiming that the real Bridget had been taken by the fairies and a changeling left in her place.

The Grimms had *The Juniper Tree* from the painter Philipp Otto Runge, who wrote it down in his own Low German dialect. Its opening wish, for a child “as red as blood and as white as snow”, is the same one that begins *Snow White*.

DAY FORTY-SEVEN

Persia

14 minutes

The Death of Rustem (The Shahnameh)

STORY · Ferdowsi, translated by James Atkinson, 1010 · 6 minutes

The end of Persia's greatest hero, from Ferdowsi's Book of Kings, the national epic of Iran, in James Atkinson's prose and verse (1832).

Rustem is the great champion of the Shahnameh, the Book of Kings, which Ferdowsi finished about 1010: a poem of some fifty thousand couplets on the kings and heroes of ancient Iran. Rustem serves many kings over a life of centuries; Zāl is his father and Rakush his famous horse. Atkinson tells some of the story in prose and translates the rest in verse.

Arise, oh Cup-bearer (Divan, I)

POEM · Hafiz, translated by Gertrude Bell, 1370 · 2 minutes

Persia's best-loved poet calls for wine and mourns the hard road of love, in the version by the young Gertrude Bell.

Hafiz lived in Shiraz in the fourteenth century. His poems are ghazals, short lyrics of love and wine that many readers take also as poems of the soul's love for God, so that the Cupbearer, the Tavern-keeper and the wine can be read both ways. In the last couplet he addresses himself by name, as the ghazal requires.

On the Advantages of Silence (The Gulistan, Chapter 4)

ESSAY · Saadi, translated by Edward Rehatsek (published under Richard Burton's name), 1258 · 7 minutes

From the Rose Garden, read in Persian schools for seven centuries: short tales and verses on when to hold one's tongue.

Saadi of Shiraz finished the Gulistan, or Rose Garden, in 1258: a book of short tales, each with its moral and a few lines of verse, divided into chapters on kings, dervishes,

contentment, silence, love and other subjects. One of these tales is a jibe at a Jewish neighbour, of a kind common in its time.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Seven: Persia

Rakush knew. The horse stops dead on the road and will not move, and Rustem, “suspecting nothing”, beats him on into the first pit. The champion has outlived “many a mighty king”; what kills him is a family quarrel, faked at a banquet. And the insult the king of Kábul is to deliver, that “all the family treat thee as a slave”, is the very complaint Shughad really holds. How much of the act was acting?

Saadi’s merchant hides his loss so as not to double it with “the joy of neighbors at our loss.” Hafiz does the opposite: his shame is on “each jesting mouth”, and he puts it into a poem for everyone to read. Six centuries on, Iranians still open his Divan at random to tell their fortunes.

One of Saadi’s tales ties the day together. The Sultan Mahmud whose minister will not repeat the king’s secret is Mahmud of Ghazni, the king to whom Ferdowsi presented the Shahnameh. The story goes that Mahmud promised a gold coin for every couplet and sent silver instead, and Ferdowsi gave the silver away. When the sultan relented and sent the gold, it came in at one gate of Ferdowsi’s town as his body was carried out of another.

DAY FORTY-EIGHT

Small towns

16 minutes

Hands

STORY · Sherwood Anderson, 1919 · 9 minutes

The first story of Winesburg, Ohio: a timid old man on the edge of a Midwestern town, and the hands he cannot keep still.

Lucinda Matlock

POEM · Edgar Lee Masters, 1915 · 1 minute

One of the dead of Spoon River speaks from the hill, at ninety-six, to the generation that came after her.

What's the Matter with Kansas?

ESSAY · William Allen White, 1896 · 6 minutes

The small-town newspaper editorial that made its author famous overnight and was reprinted across the country.

In 1896 William Allen White, aged twenty-eight, was editor of the Emporia Gazette, a small-town newspaper in Kansas. That summer the state was swept by the People's Party, or Populists, a farmers' movement against banks and railroads that backed William Jennings Bryan for president. White was a Republican, and the editorial is sarcastic from start to finish: every "Kansas is all right" means the opposite. Mrs. Lease, near the end, was a famous Populist speaker.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Eight: Small towns

“It is a job for a poet,” Anderson’s narrator says of Wing’s hands, and twice more he calls for “the poet” who could tell their story properly. Four years before Winesburg, Ohio, Masters had done something like it in verse: Spoon River Anthology lets the dead of a small Illinois town speak for themselves from the hill. Masters was a Chicago lawyer, for some years the partner of Clarence Darrow, the most famous defence lawyer in America, and he modelled Lucinda Matlock on his own grandmother.

Winesburg is proud of Wing’s hands “in the same spirit in which it was proud of Banker White’s new stone house”. White’s Kansas has lost its pride, and its banks too. But both towns know how to get rid of people. A dozen men with lanterns and a rope drive Adolph Myers out into the night; White, at his most sarcastic, proposes, “Let’s drive all the decent self-respecting men out of the state.” The editorial made him famous, but it didn’t win Kansas. That November the state voted for Bryan.

DAY FORTY-NINE

The Fourth of July

A longer day, 51 minutes

Désirée's Baby

STORY · Kate Chopin, 1893 · 9 minutes

Louisiana before the Civil War: a foundling girl marries the proud master of a great plantation, and gives birth to a son.

On Being Brought from Africa to America

POEM · Phillis Wheatley, 1773 · 1 minute

Eight lines by the first African-American to publish a book of poems, taken from West Africa as a child.

Phillis Wheatley was taken from West Africa as a small child and sold in Boston in 1761 to the Wheatley family, who taught her to read. Her *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773) was the first book of poems published by an African-American.

What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?

ESSAY · Frederick Douglass, 1852 · 42 minutes

Invited to speak in Rochester on Independence Day, Douglass asks his audience what their celebration means to the enslaved.

Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1838 and became the best-known abolitionist speaker in America. He gave this speech in Rochester, New York, in July 1852, to an audience gathered to celebrate Independence Day.

AFTERWORD

Day Forty-Nine: The Fourth of July

Chopin never tells us where Désirée came from. The last line settles where the baby got his colour, but not where she got hers: she may be exactly as white as she says. And one line may make you look again. The baby cries so loudly that “Armand heard him the other day as far away as La Blanche’s cabin.” What was he doing there?

“Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man?” Douglass asks, and refuses to. Eighty years earlier, Wheatley’s book had needed a statement signed by eighteen of the leading men of Boston, John Hancock among them, assuring readers that an enslaved girl really had written the poems.

Douglass ends with verses by William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist who had first set him to lecturing. But the two men had fallen out over the very thing Douglass praises near the end, the Constitution. Douglass had lately decided it was “a Glorious Liberty Document”. Garrison called it “a covenant with death, and an agreement with hell”, and on the Fourth of July two years after this speech, he burned a copy in public.

Week Eight

DAY FIFTY

The Buddha

12 minutes

Kisā Gotamī and the Mustard Seed

STORY · Buddhaghosa, translated by Eugene Watson Burlingame, c. 450 · 6 minutes

A young mother, mad with grief, carries her dead child from house to house asking for medicine, until someone sends her to the Buddha.

The Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, taught in northern India in the fifth century BC; "the Teacher" is the Buddha himself. Stories like this one were told in the commentaries on his sayings, written in the Pali language centuries later; this one explains a verse of the Dhammapada, the collection of his sayings, which is quoted at the beginning and the end.

Kisā Gotamī's Psalm (Therīgāthā)

POEM · Kisā Gotamī, translated by C. A. F. Rhys Davids, c. 450 BC · 2 minutes

The verses the Buddhist tradition gives to Kisā Gotamī herself, from the oldest surviving anthology of poems by women.

These verses come from the Therīgāthā, the Psalms of the Sisters: poems by the first Buddhist nuns, preserved in the Pali scriptures. In the middle Kisā Gotamī takes up the story of another nun, Paṭācārā, who lost husband, children and parents in a single journey.

The Fire Sermon

ESSAY · The Buddha, translated by F. L. Woodward, c. 500 BC · 4 minutes

The Buddha's third sermon, preached to a thousand fire-worshippers: everything, he tells them, is burning.

By tradition this was the Buddha's third sermon, preached near Gaya, in northern India, to a thousand followers who had lately been ascetics who tended sacred fires. "The all" is

everything that can be experienced; the āsavas in the last line are the deep cravings that, in Buddhist teaching, bind a person to rebirth.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty: The Buddha

Did the Teacher lie to her? Asked whether he knows what will cure her child, he answers, “Yea, that know I,” and sends her for mustard seed he must know she will never find. What she brings back cures something else: by evening, “hard became the heart the which erewhile was soft with mother’s love.” Is that a loss or a healing? Her psalm has no doubt: “I, even I, am healèd of my hurt.” Notice, too, how her story begins. She is the one person who sees gold where everyone else sees charcoal.

Fire runs through all three pieces. They come to take her son’s body away “for burning”; in the psalm a mother, father and brother burn together “on a scanty pyre”; the Buddha tells a thousand listeners that “the all is on fire”; and her last lesson comes from lamp flames, where “some flare up, while others flicker out”. The word Nibbāna (nirvana, in Sanskrit) means a blowing out, as of a flame.

T. S. Eliot called the third part of *The Waste Land* (1922) “The Fire Sermon”, and ended it on the word “burning”. In his notes he set the Buddha’s sermon beside Christ’s Sermon on the Mount in importance.

DAY FIFTY-ONE

Anglo-Saxon England

17 minutes

The Story of Cædmon

STORY · Bede, translated by L. C. Jane, c. 731 · 5 minutes

A man well on in years, working in the stables of an English monastery, who slips away from feasts whenever the instrument comes round to him for a song, from Bede's history of the English church.

Bede, a monk in Northumbria, finished his history of the English church in 731. "This abbess" is Hild, who ruled the monastery of men and women at Whitby on the Yorkshire coast; the story is set about 680.

The Seafarer

POEM · Anonymous (Old English), translated by Ezra Pound, c. 950 · 5 minutes

An old sailor on the hardship and the pull of the sea, in Ezra Pound's rough, alliterative version of the Old English.

This Old English poem survives in a single manuscript copied in the tenth century. Ezra Pound's version (1912) imitates the sound of the original, with its heavy beats and alliteration, rather than translating word for word, and leaves out its closing lines of prayer.

The Year 1087, and King William (The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle)

ESSAY · Anonymous (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle), translated by James Ingram, 1087 · 7 minutes

An English monk who "often looked upon him, and lived sometime in his court" sums up the year of famine and fire in which the Conqueror died.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was a year-by-year history kept in English by monks. William, Duke of Normandy, had conquered England in 1066 and ruled it for twenty-one years; this

entry was written by an English monk who had known his court. The "book" in which William set down who held every hide of land is Domesday Book.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-One: Anglo-Saxon England

Caedmon gets up from the table whenever he sees “the instrument come towards him”, and the Seafarer “hath not heart for harping”. Both are strangers to the songs of the hall, and both find a song somewhere else: one in a stable, the other on the “whale-path”.

Bede warns that verses “cannot be literally translated out of one language into another, without losing much of their beauty”, and gives only the sense of Caedmon’s hymn, in Latin. But copyists wrote the English words into copies of his book, and so Caedmon’s nine lines survive: the oldest English poem whose poet we can name. Pound went the other way, keeping the sound and letting the sense go where it would. Where the Old English says a man’s praise will live “mid englum”, among the angels, Pound has “mid the English”. Bede himself tells the old story behind that pun: Gregory, later pope, saw fair-haired English boys for sale in Rome and said they were not Angles but angels.

The monk of 1087 marvels that the “lord of many lands” ended with “a space of seven feet”. It was not even that. A monk in Normandy, writing in the next century, says the king’s body was too big for its stone coffin, and burst as they forced it in.

DAY FIFTY-TWO

Glory

32 minutes

Chickamauga

STORY · Ambrose Bierce, 1889 · 10 minutes

A small boy with a wooden sword wanders away from his plantation home into the forest one autumn afternoon, playing at soldiers.

Chickamauga Creek, in the hills of north-west Georgia, gave its name to one of the bloodiest battles of the American Civil War, fought there in September 1863. Ambrose Bierce fought in it as a young Union officer.

After Blenheim (The Battle of Blenheim)

POEM · Robert Southey, 1798 · 3 minutes

"But 'twas a famous victory": two children find a skull by the stream, and ask their grandfather what the battle was for.

The Battle of Blenheim was fought in Bavaria in 1704, when an English and Austrian army under the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene destroyed a French one. Southey wrote the poem almost a century later.

The Strenuous Life

ESSAY · Theodore Roosevelt, 1899 · 19 minutes

"Far better it is to dare mighty things": Roosevelt, just home from the war in Cuba, tells a Chicago club what a man and a nation are for.

In 1898 the United States fought a short war with Spain, in Cuba and the Philippines, and Theodore Roosevelt came home a hero, having led a volunteer cavalry regiment, the Rough Riders, at San Juan Hill. The war left the United States in possession of the Philippines, where it was now fighting the Filipinos who wanted independence. Roosevelt, governor of New York and soon to be President, gave this speech in Chicago in April 1899.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Two: Glory

Kaspar's father fled when "They burnt his dwelling to the ground", and "many a childing mother then, / And new-born infant died." Bierce's boy dances before a burning house, and finds his mother beside it. Roosevelt counts the same costs. If the North had chosen peace in 1861, he says, "we would have prevented the heartbreak of many women, the dissolution of many homes", and he thanks God that "the ignoble counsels of peace were rejected".

He even has an answer for Peterkin's "But what good came of it at last?" Of the Civil War he can say that "in the end the slave was freed, the Union restored". Old Kaspar has nothing but "a famous victory". Bierce, who fought for that Union, gives no answer at all. His boy slept through the battle "as heedless of the grandeur of the struggle as the dead who had died to make the glory."

"Far better it is to dare mighty things" became the speech's most famous line. In 2021 NASA's engineers hid "Dare mighty things", in code, in the pattern of the parachute that set the Perseverance rover down on Mars. Roosevelt's youngest son, Quentin, became a fighter pilot in the next war and was shot down over France in July 1918. His father died six months later.

DAY FIFTY-THREE

Tang China, around 810

25 minutes

The Story of Ying-ying

STORY · Yuan Zhen, translated by Arthur Waley, c. 804 · 15 minutes

The most famous love story of the Tang dynasty, by Bai Juyi's closest friend: a young scholar meets a beautiful cousin in a monastery where both have taken refuge from mutinous soldiers.

Yuan Zhen was a poet and official of the Tang dynasty and the closest friend of Bai Juyi; many readers have taken the young man Chang to be a portrait of Yuan Zhen himself.

The Lute Song

POEM · Bai Juyi, translated by L. Cranmer-Byng, c. 816 · 5 minutes

An official in exile hears a woman playing the lute on a boat at night, and finds her story is his own.

Bai Juyi wrote this poem in 816, after he had been demoted and sent away from the capital to a minor post on the Yangtze. The "lute" is the pipa, a four-stringed instrument played with a plectrum.

Memorial on the Bone of Buddha

ESSAY · Han Yu, translated by Herbert A. Giles, c. 819 · 5 minutes

The great Confucian prose stylist protests to the emperor against honouring a relic of the Buddha.

In 819 the Tang emperor had a relic said to be a bone of the Buddha carried in procession into his palace. Han Yu, a senior official and a champion of the old Confucian ways, sent him this protest. It nearly cost him his life, and he was banished to the far south.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Three: Tang China, around 810

On their last evening Ying-ying begins “Rainbow Skirts and Feather Jackets”, and it “broke off into a wild and passionate dirge”. Readers then knew that tune. It came from the court of the emperor Xuanzong, where his favourite, Yang Guifei, danced to it. When rebellion broke out in 755 his soldiers blamed her, and the next year he had to order her death. Bai Juyi told the story in his most famous poem, the Song of Everlasting Sorrow, where war drums break off this same tune. So when Chang says that “a single woman” brought kings of old to ruin, his hearers had a nearer case in mind. Han Yu has his own idea of what ruins emperors: “the bone of a man long since dead”.

Ying-ying won’t come when she is called, neither to thank her cousin at the feast nor, years later, to see him in her husband’s house. Bai Juyi’s lute-girl does come, “Hiding her burning face behind her lute”, and the banished official weeps for her. Everyone who hears Ying-ying’s letter is “deeply moved”; many end by praising “the skill with which he extricated himself”.

A play of about 1300, *The Romance of the Western Chamber*, gave the story a happy ending, with the lovers married. And the maid Hung-niang, who carried the poems, became the Chinese word for a matchmaker: hongniang.

DAY FIFTY-FOUR

Enlightenment

20 minutes

Memnon the Philosopher

STORY · Voltaire, 1749 · 9 minutes

Voltaire's comic tale of a man who resolves, one morning, to become perfectly wise.

Anonymous translation from Voltaire's *Romances* (1889). Standard Ebooks' Peter Phalen translation would be preferable once it is readable online.

Wanderer's Night-Song

POEM · Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1780 · 1 minute

Eight lines pencilled on a hut wall, and perhaps the most famous poem in German.

An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?

ESSAY · Immanuel Kant, translated by Lewis White Beck, 1784 · 11 minutes

"Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own reason!": the motto of an age.

In 1783 a Berlin magazine asked, in passing, what "enlightenment" actually is; this is Kant's answer, published there the next year. Kant was a philosophy professor in Königsberg, in Prussia, whose king, Frederick the Great, is the "one prince in the world" he praises.

Beck's translation (1963) is public domain in the US because its copyright was not renewed (Wikisource, PD-US-no-renewal).

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Four: Enlightenment

Kant says people kept in harness are afraid to go alone, though “by falling a few times they would finally learn to walk alone”. Memnon decides one morning to be perfectly wise, and by night he falls “almost lifeless under a plane-tree”. His good genius and Kant end in the same place: “everything goes on by degrees”, and the public “can only slowly attain enlightenment”. We live, Kant says, not in an enlightened age but in “an age of enlightenment”.

Both writers knew the prince who says, “Argue as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!” Voltaire lived at Frederick the Great’s court for nearly three years, quarrelled with him, and on his way home was held at Frankfurt for weeks by Frederick’s agents. Kant’s turn came later. In 1794 Frederick’s nephew and successor rebuked him for what he had published on religion, and Kant promised, as His Majesty’s loyal subject, to say no more about it. He argued, and obeyed. When that king died, Kant held himself released, and wrote on religion again.

Goethe pencilled his eight lines on the wall of a hut on a wooded hilltop in 1780. In 1831, just before his eighty-second birthday, he went up to the hut again, found them, read them through, and wept. He died the next spring.

DAY FIFTY-FIVE

Tempting fate

23 minutes

The Monkey's Paw

STORY · W. W. Jacobs, 1902 · 16 minutes

An old soldier back from India brings a mummified paw to a cosy family evening and warns them not to wish on it.

To an Athlete Dying Young (A Shropshire Lad, XIX)

POEM · A. E. Housman, 1896 · 1 minute

The town that once carried a young runner home shoulder-high carries him again.

Solon and Croesus

ESSAY · Herodotus, translated by G. C. Macaulay, c. 430 BC · 6 minutes

The richest king in the world asks a visiting Athenian lawmaker who is the happiest man he has ever met.

Croesus was king of Lydia, in what is now western Turkey, in the sixth century BC; his capital was Sardis, and his wealth became a byword. The story opens just after he has conquered the Greek cities of the coast. Herodotus, the first Greek historian, told it about a century later; the numbers are the chapters of his book.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Five: Tempting fate

Solon's second-happiest men, Cleobis and Biton, "had won prizes in the games", and died in their sleep on their day of glory. Housman would agree: "Smart lad, to slip betimes away / From fields where glory does not stay". Their death was a gift, asked of the goddess by their mother: "that gift which is best for man to receive". Mrs. White asks a gift for her son too. Which mother is answered more kindly?

Before the first wish, Mr. White says, "It seems to me I've got all I want." Solon would have called him fortunate, but not yet happy, "for to many God shows but a glimpse of happiness and then plucks them up by the roots".

Croesus learned what Solon meant. Herodotus goes on to tell how, soon after Solon left, the king's son was killed in a hunting accident; how an oracle told Croesus that if he made war on Persia he would destroy a great empire, and he did, his own; and how, bound on a pyre by the Persian king Cyrus, he groaned and called out Solon's name three times. Cyrus asked who Solon was, heard the story, and ordered the fire put out. Croesus was also the fifth generation from Gyges: his fall was the vengeance the Pythian priestess had foretold.

DAY FIFTY-SIX

The Wild West

A longer day, 43 minutes

The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky

STORY · Stephen Crane, 1898 · 18 minutes

The marshal of a Texas border town brings home a wife he married in San Antonio without telling anyone, and dreads the welcome.

The Cowboy's Lament ("The Streets of Laredo")

POEM · Anonymous (cowboy song), 1910 · 4 minutes

"As I walked out in the streets of Laredo": the best-known cowboy song, as John Lomax collected it from singers on the cattle ranges.

Climbing Long's Peak (A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains, Letter 7)

ESSAY · Isabella Bird, 1873 · 21 minutes

An Englishwoman riding alone through Colorado in 1873 climbs the highest peak in sight, with a one-eyed desperado called Mountain Jim as her guide.

Isabella Bird, an Englishwoman in her forties, rode alone through the Rocky Mountains in the autumn of 1873 and described the journey in letters to her sister, published in 1879 as *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*. In this one she is staying at a ranch in Estes Park, Colorado, kept by Griffith Evans; "Mountain Jim" Nugent was a trapper who lived in a cabin nearby.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Six: The Wild West

Scratchy Wilson's maroon shirt was made "by some Jewish women on the east side of New York", and his boots are the kind "beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England". Crane's wild West is already a costume: "The man was playing with this town." Bird has the same doubt about her desperado: when Jim weeps by the camp fire, she wonders whether it was "semi-conscious acting". And the dying cowboy stages his own funeral, down to the roses on the coffin.

But why would a cowboy want fifes, drums and the Dead March? The song came west from an older ballad, "The Unfortunate Rake", about a young soldier dying in hospital of a disease he caught from a woman. Hence the military funeral, and "There goes an unfortunate boy to his home", and the refrain, "I know I've done wrong". When Lomax published his *Cowboy Songs* in 1910, a letter of praise from Theodore Roosevelt was printed at the front of the book.

Jim's end was no song. The next summer Griffith Evans, the rancher whose boots Bird wore up the mountain, shot him in a quarrel, and Jim died of his wounds that autumn.

Week Nine

DAY FIFTY-SEVEN

Kings

17 minutes

David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12)

STORY · The Bible (King James Version), 1611 · 8 minutes

In the season when kings go out to battle, King David stays at home in Jerusalem, and walks one evening on the roof of his house.

David, the shepherd boy who killed the giant Goliath, became the second king of Israel, about 1000 BC, and made Jerusalem his capital. These two chapters of the second book of Samuel tell one story about him, complete in itself. Joab is the commander of his army, and Nathan is a prophet.

Death the Leveller ('The glories of our blood and state')

POEM · James Shirley, 1659 · 1 minute

A song from a forgotten play, on the death that brings kings down to the level of the poor, which has outlived everything else Shirley wrote.

Of the Inconvenience of Greatness

ESSAY · Michel de Montaigne, translated by Charles Cotton, 1588 · 9 minutes

Montaigne, who had met kings, explains why he would never want to be one.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Seven: Kings

Montaigne's prince never gets a fair contest, because everyone lets him win. Joab is that kind of courtier. He fights the war, and when Rabbah is ready to fall he sends for the king, "lest I take the city, and it be called after my name". So the Ammonite king's crown, "a talent of gold", is set on David's head, just as Brisson "purposely missed his blow" when he ran against Alexander. Around the king it is the same. Joab coaches the messenger in case "the king's wrath arise", and the servants are afraid to tell David that his child is dead. Only Nathan tells him the truth, and even he has to come at it sideways, with a story that gets the king to pass sentence on himself. Shirley's Death is Carneades's horse, "neither a flatterer nor a courtier": it throws kings into the dust with "the poor crookèd scythe and spade".

Montaigne's "two Scottish authors" were real, and he knew one of them. The one who left the king "in a worse condition than a carter" was George Buchanan, who had taught Montaigne as a boy at school in Bordeaux. The other, Adam Blackwood, wrote to answer him. Buchanan went on to be tutor to the young James VI of Scotland, who grew up to write a book of his own in defence of the divine right of kings.

DAY FIFTY-EIGHT

South Africa

27 minutes

A Dream of Wild Bees

STORY · Olive Schreiner, 1890 · 4 minutes

A tired mother darning by an open window in the African heat, in one of the allegories by the author of *The Story of an African Farm*.

Afar in the Desert

POEM · Thomas Pringle, 1824 · 5 minutes

The father of South African poetry rides alone into the Karoo, 'with the silent Bush-boy alone by my side'.

Thomas Pringle, a Scottish poet, came to the Eastern Cape with a party of settlers in 1820 and later campaigned in London against slavery. "Bush-boy" was the settlers' word for a San servant; the Karoo is the dry inland plateau of the Cape, and the quagga, now extinct, was a kind of zebra.

One Night with the Fugitives (Native Life in South Africa)

ESSAY · Sol T. Plaatje, 1916 · 17 minutes

A founder of the African National Congress rides out in 1913 to meet Black families evicted from their land by the new Natives' Land Act.

Sol Plaatje was a journalist and the first general secretary of the South African Native National Congress, which became the ANC. The Natives' Land Act of 1913 forbade Black South Africans to buy or rent land outside small reserves, and tenant farmers were turned off the farms where they had lived for generations. Plaatje wrote this book in London, where he had gone to appeal to the British government. He quotes white farmers and officials using "Kafir", a racial slur.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Eight: South Africa

Olive Schreiner was herself the ninth of twelve children, born to a missionary family in the Eastern Cape. The dreaming mother in her story is carrying “the ninth child”.

Pringle and Plaatje both ride out with their childhoods on their minds. Pringle, “a lone exile”, remembers a native land across the sea. Plaatje is cycling through the district where he was born, and the law forbids anyone to sell him the spot. Pringle rides away from “the bondsman’s sigh” into country “Where the white man’s foot hath never passed”, with his gun “The only law in the desert land”. Nearly ninety years later Plaatje finds law everywhere: a pass he hasn’t got, a policeman on the road, and families who may not stop on any farm, even to bury a child. Schreiner’s last gift is a strange one in such a country. The child it touches will look across “the burning sands where, to other men, there is only the desert’s waste” and see a blue sea.

The Bush-boy rides beside Pringle in every refrain and never says a word. But Pringle did help one servant speak. Mary Prince, born a slave in Bermuda, was working in his London house when she told the story of her life, and in 1831 he published it as *The History of Mary Prince*, the first account of a Black woman’s life to be published in Britain.

DAY FIFTY-NINE

Japan, beauty and impermanence

23 minutes

The Tattooer

STORY · Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, 1910 · 13 minutes

Tanizaki's debut, a dark fable of beauty and the artist's obsession in Edo-era Japan.

Translated on Standard Ebooks as "Tattooing". Its translators (Ijichi Sumimasa, Iwadō Z. Tamotsu, Endo Haruo and Eric S. Bell, 1927–30) are credited for the whole collection, not story by story; this is the only free translation found.

The Colour of the Flower (Hyakunin Isshu 9)

POEM · Ono no Komachi, translated by William N. Porter, c. 850 · 1 minute

The most famous poem by Japan's legendary woman poet, on beauty fading while one looks on.

Ono no Komachi was a poet at the Japanese court in the ninth century, remembered for her beauty and her pride. In Japanese the poem is five short lines, and its opening can mean both "the flower's colour fades in the long rain" and "my beauty fades as I grow older in the world". Porter's English adds rhyme and a line.

Porter's 1909 edition gives the romanised Japanese, a rhymed version and a short commentary.

The Cup of Humanity

ESSAY · Kakuzō Okakura, 1906 · 10 minutes

The opening chapter of *The Book of Tea*, written in English to explain Japan to the West.

AFTERWORD

Day Fifty-Nine: Japan, beauty and impermanence

In Japan a beautiful girl is still called a komachi, and a rice from Akita, which claims the poet as its own, and the bullet train to Akita are both named after her. Two old stories are told about her. In one, she promised a courtier her love if he would visit her for a hundred nights running, and he died on the ninety-ninth. In the other, she lived on into old age, a beggar woman with her beauty long gone. Seikichi's girl has the first story ahead of her: before she leaves his house she has called him her "first victim". His needle is his answer to the second. The colour that the rain washes from a flower, he pricks into living skin.

Okakura's tea goes the other way, "a worship of the Imperfect" that asks us to "dream of evanescence". Yet he and Tanizaki start from the same place. Tanizaki opens on an age that had "the virtue of stupidity"; Okakura ends by inviting us to "linger in the beautiful foolishness of things". And his best definition of Teism, "the art of concealing beauty that you may discover it", fits the spider exactly. It lives under her clothes, and the story ends at the moment she lets it be seen.

DAY SIXTY

Roots

11 minutes

Karintha

STORY · Jean Toomer, 1923 · 3 minutes

The first piece of *Cane*, Toomer's book of Georgia: a girl in a small Southern town whose beauty everyone watches grow up too fast.

Karintha is the first piece in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), a book of stories, poems and sketches of Black life in rural Georgia, where Toomer had worked as a schoolteacher.

Flame-Heart

POEM · Claude McKay, 1920 · 2 minutes

A Jamaican poet in New York tries to remember the island of his childhood.

Claude McKay grew up in Jamaica and came to the United States in 1912; this poem appeared in *Harlem Shadows* (1922). The flame-heart is a flowering tree; pimento, ping-wing and rose-apple are Jamaican plants.

How It Feels to Be Colored Me

ESSAY · Zora Neale Hurston, 1928 · 6 minutes

Hurston remembers the day, at thirteen, she left all-Black Eatonville, Florida, and 'became colored'.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty: Roots

Karintha never says a word. Everything in her story is what other people see and want: the old men who rode her hobby-horse, the young men counting time, the song that keeps asking “O cant you see it”. The men “will die not having found it out”. Hurston, on her gate-post, was watched too, and the tourists paid her “small silver” to sing and dance for them. But she tells us what they never knew: “I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop”. The whole essay is a voice that won’t let anyone else tell her story.

When Hurston died poor in 1960, she was buried in an unmarked grave in Florida. In 1973 the novelist Alice Walker went looking for it, and put up a stone that calls her “A Genius of the South”. Walker took the phrase from Toomer: it comes from a poem in *Cane*, the book that opens with Karintha.

McKay’s Jamaica is a childhood Karintha never had, “All innocent of passion, uncorrupt”, and he has “embalmed” it. He counted “ten brief years” since he left the island. He never went back.

DAY SIXTY-ONE

Cunning

26 minutes

The Cyclops (Odyssey, Book IX)

STORY · Homer, translated by Samuel Butler, c. 700 BC · 19 minutes

On his long voyage home from Troy, Ulysses takes twelve of his best men to explore the island of the Cyclopes, giants with one eye who have no laws.

Homer's Odyssey tells how the Greek hero Ulysses (Odysseus in Greek), after ten years at the siege of Troy, spent ten years more trying to sail home to his island of Ithaca.

Shipwrecked at last among the Phaeacians, he tells their king the story of his travels; this episode is the one most often read on its own. Butler gives the gods their Roman names:

Jove is the king of the gods, and Neptune the god of the sea.

The Spider and the Fly

POEM · Mary Howitt, 1829 · 3 minutes

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the Spider to the Fly: the poem the saying comes from.

How Princes Should Keep Faith (The Prince, Chapter 18)

ESSAY · Niccolò Machiavelli, translated by W. K. Marriott, 1532 · 4 minutes

The most notorious chapter of the most notorious book about power, on whether a ruler has to keep his word.

Niccolò Machiavelli served the republic of Florence as a diplomat until the Medici family took the city back in 1512; he was imprisoned and tortured, and on his release wrote The Prince on his farm outside the city, hoping to win the Medici's favour. It is a handbook for a new ruler on how to take power and keep it. Pope Alexander VI, whom he mentions, was the father of Cesare Borgia.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-One: Cunning

Who walks into whose parlour? Ulysses goes into the cave against his men's advice, "in the hope that he might give me a present". The Cyclops does promise one: he will eat Noman last. Blind and beaten, he then tries the spider's way, all hospitality: "come here, then, Ulysses, that I may make you presents". Ulysses doesn't fall for that. But he falls for the fly's weakness. Safe on the water, he can't bear the glory to go to Noman, and shouts out his real name, which is all Polyphemus needs to pray to his father Neptune against him. Machiavelli's fox would have kept quiet: it is "necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic".

In Greek the trick is a pun. Ulysses calls himself Outis, "no one". When the other Cyclopes call back, they use the other Greek words for "no one", *mē tis*, and *mētis* is the word for cunning, the quality Homer is always praising in Ulysses. No one is hurting Polyphemus, and so is cunning.

DAY SIXTY-TWO

The Australian bush

18 minutes

The Drover's Wife

STORY · Henry Lawson, 1892 · 13 minutes

Alone in a bark hut with four children while her husband is away droving, a woman sits up all night watching for a snake.

Clancy of the Overflow

POEM · A. B. Paterson, 1889 · 2 minutes

A Sydney clerk in a dingy office envies the drover he once wrote to.

Preface to Gordon's Poems (Australian Scenery)

ESSAY · Marcus Clarke, 1876 · 3 minutes

The novelist's famous description of the Australian bush and its 'weird melancholy', written as a preface to a friend's poems.

Marcus Clarke, the novelist of convict Australia, wrote this as part of his preface to the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon, the bush balladeer, in 1876.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Two: The Australian bush

The Drover's Wife first appeared in the Sydney Bulletin on 23 July 1892. The same issue printed Paterson's answer to a poem in which Lawson had mocked city poets who made the bush sound romantic, and for months afterwards the two argued in verse about what the bush was really like. Paterson told Lawson, "the bush will never suit you, and you'll never suit the bush." Both men ended up on Australia's ten-dollar note, Lawson in 1966 and Paterson in 1993.

Clancy is a hero of Paterson's side. His clerk pictures the drover riding behind the stock, singing, while "the bush hath friends to meet him". Lawson shows who stays at home. His drover "may forget sometimes that he is married", and his wife has not heard from him for six months. Clarke's "beauty of loneliness" might have been written for her: as a girl-wife she hated the bush, but now "she would feel strange away from it".

At daybreak her son swears he will never go droving. He is eleven.

DAY SIXTY-THREE

Growing old

A longer day, 46 minutes

The Bishop

STORY · Anton Chekhov, translated by Constance Garnett, 1902 · 25 minutes

Chekhov's late story of a bishop in the days before Easter, worn out by his duties, whose old mother is too shy to treat him as her son.

The story takes place in Holy Week, the days before Easter, the most solemn time of the Russian Orthodox year. A suffragan bishop is an assistant to the bishop of a diocese.

Sailing to Byzantium

POEM · W. B. Yeats, 1928 · 2 minutes

'That is no country for old men': Yeats at sixty-two imagines a voyage to the holy city of Byzantium.

Byzantium, the old name of Constantinople, was for Yeats a city of unchanging, sacred art: gold mosaics of saints, and the work of goldsmiths. He wrote the poem in his sixties. To "perne in a gyre" is to spin in a spiral.

Old Age

ESSAY · Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1862 · 19 minutes

Emerson, nearing sixty, sets out what old age gives as well as what it takes.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Three: Growing old

In February 1825 John Adams told the young Emerson that his son, the new President, would come home to Quincy only for his funeral. He died the next year on the Fourth of July, fifty years to the day after the Declaration of Independence, a few hours after Thomas Jefferson, one of the presidents he had named that day.

Emerson finds the dignity of age in “intellect”, and Yeats sails off to the “Monuments of unaging intellect”. Both trust an old man’s mind to outlive his body. Chekhov’s bishop goes the other way. Emerson says age “is comely in coaches, in churches, in chairs of state”, and the bishop has all three, with “costly bells” and five golden cupolas besides. Yet nobody will speak to him “simply, as to a human being”, not even his mother, until he is dying and seems “more insignificant than any one”. “How good,” he thinks. Only then does his mother call him “Pavlusha”. Yeats wants to become a bird of hammered gold, singing for ever to lords and ladies. The bishop, at the end, imagines he is “free now as a bird”.

Chekhov was forty-two, and ill with the tuberculosis that killed him two years later, when he published the story. And Yeats’s first line gave Cormac McCarthy the title of his novel *No Country for Old Men*.

Week Ten

DAY SIXTY-FOUR

Devotion

12 minutes

The Gift of the Magi

STORY · O. Henry, 1905 · 8 minutes

One dollar and eighty-seven cents is all Della has to buy her husband a Christmas present, and Christmas is tomorrow.

How do I love thee? (Sonnets from the Portuguese 43)

POEM · Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1850 · 1 minute

The best-known love sonnet in English after Shakespeare's, from the sequence Barrett wrote in secret during her courtship.

Letter to Fanny Brawne (8 July 1819)

ESSAY · John Keats, 1819 · 2 minutes

Keats, at Shanklin on the Isle of Wight, writes to the girl next door in Hampstead whom he cannot afford to marry.

In 1819 John Keats, twenty-three, was in love with Fanny Brawne, his neighbour in Hampstead; that summer he went to the Isle of Wight to write. They became engaged, but he was poor, and already ill with the tuberculosis that killed him less than two years later. Rice is his friend James Rice.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Four: Devotion

“Why may I not speak of your Beauty,” Keats asks Fanny, “since without that I could never have lov’d you?” He can’t imagine love starting anywhere else. Della sells the most beautiful thing she owns, hair that “reached below her knee”, and her one prayer as Jim climbs the stairs is “Please God, make him think I am still pretty.” Then she asks him straight out: “I’m me without my hair, ain’t I?” Jim is sure no haircut “could make me like my girl any less”. Would Keats have been so sure?

Della counts her money three times, and it comes to \$1.87. Barrett sets out to “count the ways”, and her count runs past anything that can be measured: depth, breadth and height, then “the breath, / Smiles, tears, of all my life”, then whatever comes after death. Della says it outright, remembering the Bible. “Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered,” she tells Jim, “but nobody could ever count my love for you.”

Keats was wary of women who “would like to be married to a Poem”. Robert Browning fell for Elizabeth Barrett’s poems before he ever met her. His first letter to her, in January 1845, begins “I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett”. Twenty months later they married in secret and left for Italy, and her father never forgave her.

DAY SIXTY-FIVE

Truth and lies

19 minutes

The Piece of String

STORY · Guy de Maupassant, translated by Jonathan Sturges, 1883 · 10 minutes

A Norman peasant picks up a bit of string in the market square, and is seen doing it.

I like a look of Agony

POEM · Emily Dickinson, 1890 · 1 minute

Eight lines on why Dickinson trusts the look of pain.

On the Decay of the Art of Lying

ESSAY · Mark Twain, 1882 · 9 minutes

A paper for a Hartford historical club, defending the lie as an art that deserves to be practised well.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Five: Truth and lies

Maître Hauchecorne's trouble starts with a small lie, not a big one. Ashamed to be seen by his enemy picking up string, he hides it and "pretended to be still looking for something on the ground". Twain knew that kind of lie: even when a man "keeps his tongue still, his hands, his feet, his eyes, his attitude, will convey deception". The pretence is exactly what Malandain reports to the mayor: "you even looked about for some time in the mud". After that, every true word Hauchecorne says, with "more solemn oaths" each time, only makes things worse. "An awkward, unscientific lie is often as ineffectual as the truth," says Twain. Here the truth is the awkward thing.

Dickinson trusts only what can't be put on: "Men do not sham convulsion, / Nor simulate a throe." The one proof nobody can call a liar's is the last: "The eyes glaze once, and that is death. / Impossible to feign". Hauchecorne gives them that proof at last, still protesting in his delirium. Did anyone believe him then?

When Twain's truthful lady protests "Not all!", he says it was "before 'Pinafore's' time", or he'd have given the obvious answer. In Gilbert and Sullivan's HMS Pinafore (1878) the captain boasts that he is never sick at sea, and his crew sing back "What, never?" until he admits it: "Hardly ever!"

DAY SIXTY-SIX

Nerves

11 minutes

The Open Window

STORY · Saki (H. H. Munro), 1914 · 5 minutes

A nervous young man, sent to the country for a rest cure, calls at a house with a letter of introduction and is kept company by the hostess's niece, aged fifteen.

To Sleep ('A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by')

POEM · William Wordsworth, 1807 · 1 minute

A sonnet by a poet who has lain awake three nights running and tried everything.

On Quiet and Study (Letter 56)

ESSAY · Seneca, translated by Richard M. Gummere, c. 64 · 5 minutes

Seneca writes from lodgings above a noisy bath-house, and asks whether real quiet comes from outside.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Six: Nerves

Seneca spends a whole letter proving that a settled mind can study above a bath-house, through the grunting weight-lifters, the hair-plucker's yelling customers and the sausage-man's cries. Then, in his last lines, he announces that he is moving out: "I merely wished to test myself." Wordsworth has tried every soothing thing he can think of, "I've thought of all by turns", and he is still awake.

Framton's doctors order "complete rest, an absence of mental excitement", and what undoes him isn't noise at all. It is a girl talking. Seneca knew why: "words demand attention, but noises merely fill the ears". Vera's words turn three muddy men and a tired spaniel into the dead, and a hoarse voice singing in the dusk into a ghost's. Framton becomes Seneca's frightened man, for whom "any cry is taken for the battle-shout". The only settled mind in the room belongs to Vera, who tells her next story "calmly".

Saki's own nerves were tested harder. When war came in 1914 he was forty-three, but he joined up as a private soldier and refused a commission. He was killed by a sniper in France in November 1916, sheltering in a shell crater. His last words, as his comrades told it, were "Put that bloody cigarette out!"

DAY SIXTY-SEVEN

Get rich quick

30 minutes

Ukridge's Accident Syndicate

STORY · P. G. Wodehouse, 1923 · 26 minutes

Ukridge stops outside a fashionable London wedding to look at the bridegroom, an actor he knew when they were both broke, and explains what the man owes him.

The Men That Don't Fit In

POEM · Robert W. Service, 1907 · 2 minutes

"There's a race of men that don't fit in": the gold-rush poet of "The Cremation of Sam McGee" on the men who are always off after the next big chance.

Advice to a Young Tradesman

ESSAY · Benjamin Franklin, 1748 · 3 minutes

"Remember that time is money": Franklin, signing himself "an old tradesman", sets out how a young man gets rich.

This edition leaves out the one-line greeting that opens some printings ("To my friend A. B. As you have desired it of me, I write the following hints").

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Seven: Get rich quick

Teddy Weeks and the old tradesman agree on more than you might think. Franklin's young man has to be seen to work: "The sound of your hammer at five in the morning" keeps his creditor easy, but if he is spotted at a billiard table the creditor wants his money the next day. Credit comes from what people see. Teddy says the same of theatre managers: "All they go by are his clothes." And he's right. The day he has the hat, the spats and the gold cigarette-case, he walks out of a manager's office "looking jubilant".

Ukridge, who lives on other people's shillings and offers to pawn a friend's banjo, is everything Franklin warns against, and he is Service's "man who won't fit in". Service says "Life's been a jolly good joke on him". Yet it is Ukridge who walks away from the wedding with "a look of deep content in his eyes". Who has the last laugh?

Neither writer kept to one kind of life. Service had drifted for years round the west of America before he settled down as a bank clerk, like Robert Dunhill, and he was working in a bank in the Yukon when these poems made him rich. Franklin signed himself "An old Tradesman" in 1748, the year he retired from his printing business, at forty-two, to give his time to science and public life. A few years later he was flying a kite in a thunderstorm.

DAY SIXTY-EIGHT

Faith and doubt

21 minutes

The Spider's Thread

STORY · Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, 1918 · 5 minutes

A Buddhist parable in three short scenes, by the author of "Rashōmon".

Dover Beach

POEM · Matthew Arnold, 1867 · 2 minutes

The poem of Victorian lost faith; "the eternal note of sadness".

A Free Man's Worship

ESSAY · Bertrand Russell, 1903 · 14 minutes

Russell's eloquent case for finding meaning without God.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Eight: Faith and doubt

Only one person in Akutagawa's Paradise minds what happens to Kandata, and the Buddha walks on "with a sad expression on his face". The lotuses "cared nothing at all about such things", and the story ends as calmly as it began: "It was near noon in Paradise." Russell's universe "cares nothing for its hopes and fears" either, and Arnold's world "Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light". Both find only one thing to set against it. "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another!" says Arnold. Russell asks us to see everyone as "fellow-sufferers in the same darkness", and to "think only of their need".

Kandata, in the darkest place of all, is surrounded by fellow-sufferers, and what he says to them is "This spider's thread is mine." The thread has held all those climbers until that moment. Then it breaks "at the point where Kandata was hanging".

Akutagawa wrote the story in 1918 for *Red Bird*, a new magazine for children. He took his plot from an American book: Paul Carus, a German-born editor in Illinois, had told a version in his Buddhist tale *Karma*, and the young D. T. Suzuki, later the man who did most to make Zen known in the West, had put it into Japanese.

DAY SIXTY-NINE

In the woods

15 minutes

Biryuk

STORY · Ivan Turgenev, translated by Constance Garnett, 1848 · 12 minutes

Caught in a storm while out hunting, the narrator is taken home by the forester the peasants call 'the wolf', a man no thief can get past.

Lights Out

POEM · Edward Thomas, 1917 · 1 minute

One of Edward Thomas's last poems, written shortly before he left for France: the forest at the borders of sleep.

Edward Thomas wrote this poem late in 1916, while training as an army officer; he was killed at Arras the following spring.

The Old Drunkard's Pavilion

ESSAY · Ouyang Xiu, translated by Herbert A. Giles, 1046 · 2 minutes

A Song-dynasty governor in exile describes the wooded hills where he drinks with his guests, and why he calls himself the Old Drunkard.

Ouyang Xiu, statesman, historian and poet of the Song dynasty, wrote this while governor of Chuzhou, a post he had been given after falling from favour at court.

AFTERWORD

Day Sixty-Nine: In the woods

Biryuk never explains himself. When the narrator calls him “a splendid fellow”, he cuts him short: “please don’t speak of it.” What he does say is “I’m not a free man; I’m made responsible.” He eats “the master’s bread”, and the thief fears a manager who “will have no mercy”. Turgenev grew up in this same Orel province, on the estate of his mother, who owned thousands of serfs and had them flogged. Thirteen years after this story appeared, Russia abolished serfdom.

The Old Drunkard is “well stricken in years”, “an old man with white hair, bald at the top of his head”. Ouyang Xiu was thirty-nine when he wrote that.

Edward Thomas’s travellers “cannot choose” their road, however straight or winding. His friend Robert Frost knew that about him. On their walks together in the country Thomas would choose a path and then regret the one they hadn’t taken, and Frost wrote *The Road Not Taken* to tease him.

DAY SEVENTY

Games of chance

A longer day, 51 minutes

The Queen of Spades

STORY · Alexander Pushkin, translated by T. Keane, 1834 · 40 minutes

Officers play faro all night in St Petersburg, and one who never gambles hears of an old countess who knows the secret of three winning cards.

Hap

POEM · Thomas Hardy, 1898 · 1 minute

Hardy's early sonnet wishing that some vengeful god were to blame for his suffering, rather than mere chance.

Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist

ESSAY · Charles Lamb, 1821 · 11 minutes

Elia's portrait of an old lady who played whist as if it were a matter of life and death, and had no patience with those who played for fun.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy: Games of chance

Hardy would take a vengeful god over blind chance. He could bear his pain, “Half-eased, too, that a Powerfuller than I / Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.” Hermann gets one, or thinks he does: the queen of spades “smiled ironically and winked her eye at him”, as the dead Countess did from her coffin. Was it her revenge? He never kept her last condition, to marry Lizaveta. But Pushkin leaves room for Hardy’s Crass Casualty too. Hermann had drunk “a great deal of wine” on the night the ghost came, and at the table he simply took the wrong card from a fresh pack, and couldn’t “understand how he had made such a mistake”. Around him “the game went on as usual”.

Lamb’s “cousin” Bridget was his sister Mary. In 1796, in a fit of madness, she stabbed their mother to death with a kitchen knife. Charles, who was twenty-one, persuaded the authorities to release her into his care, and he looked after her for the rest of his life, through the attacks that kept coming back and sent her away again and again. The game of piquet he wished “might have lasted for ever, though we gained nothing, and lost nothing” was played with her.

Tchaikovsky turned Pushkin’s story into an opera in 1890, and couldn’t leave Hermann in the asylum. His Hermann stabs himself at the card table.

Week Eleven

DAY SEVENTY-ONE

India awakening

29 minutes

Sultana's Dream

STORY · Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, 1905 · 16 minutes

A Bengali Muslim woman's feminist utopia, written in English: she dreams of a country where the men are kept indoors.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim writer and campaigner for girls' education, wrote this story in English in 1905. In many Muslim and Hindu households in India women lived in purdah, secluded from men outside the family in the women's quarters, the zenana.

Where the mind is without fear (Gitanjali 35)

POEM · Rabindranath Tagore, 1912 · 1 minute

Tagore's prayer for the country he hoped India would wake into.

Rabindranath Tagore made his own English versions of the poems of Gitanjali (1912), and won the Nobel Prize in Literature the next year. India was then ruled by Britain.

Speech at the Banaras Hindu University

ESSAY · Mohandas K. Gandhi, 1916 · 12 minutes

Newly returned from South Africa, Gandhi shocks the princes and dignitaries at a university's opening by telling them what India's freedom will really require.

In February 1916 the Viceroy, Lord Hardinge, laid the foundation stone of the Banaras Hindu University, with princes and officials in attendance. Gandhi, recently returned from South Africa and not yet the leader he would become, was invited to speak.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-One: India awakening

Rokeya said she wrote her story to pass the time while her husband was away on tour. When he came home and read it, he called it “a terrible revenge”.

Tagore prays for a country “Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls”. He meant the walls between castes and creeds, but Sultana lives behind real ones. Ladyland doesn’t pull them down; it puts the men behind them instead. “How the tables are turned,” Sultana laughs, and Sister Sara answers, “But the seclusion is the same.” Is that only a joke at the men’s expense, or a hint that nobody should be shut in?

Gandhi would have liked Ladyland’s kitchen, with “no smoke, nor any chimney”. He spends much of his speech not on the British but on the filthy lanes round the Vishwanath temple, the spitting on railway carriage floors and the princes’ jewellery: “If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be?” It is Tagore’s “dreary desert sand of dead habit”, seen from the street. And when Gandhi complains that the researches of “Professor Bose and Professor Ray” are not “the common property of the masses”, he is asking for the country of the poem, “Where knowledge is free”.

DAY SEVENTY-TWO

The poor

14 minutes

The Little Match Girl

STORY · Hans Christian Andersen, translated by Mary Howitt, 1845 · 4 minutes

New Year's Eve in the snow, and a barefoot girl who has not sold a single match all day.

The Bridge of Sighs

POEM · Thomas Hood, 1844 · 3 minutes

A young woman's body is taken from the Thames, and Hood asks the crowd to lift her tenderly.

A Nightly Scene in London

ESSAY · Charles Dickens, 1856 · 8 minutes

On a wet November night, Dickens finds five ragged bundles against the wall of the Whitechapel workhouse, and stops to ask why they are there.

Dickens wrote this for his weekly magazine *Household Words* in 1856. A workhouse was where the destitute were given food and shelter in return for work; its casual ward took in the homeless for a single night.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Two: The poor

Hood knew how to make a poem travel. His “Song of the Shirt”, about a starving London seamstress, came out in *Punch* at Christmas 1843 and was reprinted everywhere; “The Bridge of Sighs” followed a few months later. Hood died in 1845, and when his admirers put up a monument over his grave at Kensal Green, they carved on it “He sang the Song of the Shirt”.

Each of today’s pieces has a crowd in it. The people who find the match girl say “She tried to warm herself”, and “Nobody dreamed of the fine things she had seen”. Hood tells his crowd how to handle the drowned woman, and what not to ask: “Make no deep scrutiny / Into her mutiny”. Dickens’s crowd is the poorest of Whitechapel, who watch him give away shillings and don’t beg for one. Andersen shows us what the girl sees inside her head. Dickens gets nothing out of his five women: “no one cared to look at me; no one thanked me.” Which is harder to bear, a heaven we are shown, or a silence we’re not let into?

DAY SEVENTY-THREE

Prisoners

18 minutes

God Sees the Truth, But Waits

STORY · Leo Tolstoy, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, 1872 · 12 minutes

A young merchant sets off for the fair at Nizhny, though his wife begs him not to go because she has dreamt that his hair turned grey.

To Althea, from Prison

POEM · Richard Lovelace, 1649 · 1 minute

"Stone walls do not a prison make": written by a Cavalier poet jailed in 1642 for presenting a petition to Parliament.

In 1642, on the eve of the English Civil War, Richard Lovelace was jailed for presenting Parliament with a petition in support of King Charles I. The "loyal flames" and the King's praises in the poem are for Charles; Althea is a woman he loves.

Of the Things Which Are in Our Power (Discourses, Book I, Chapter 1)

ESSAY · Epictetus, translated by George Long, c. 108 · 5 minutes

A Stoic teacher who had been born a slave tells his students what no emperor can take from them.

Epictetus was born a slave about AD 50 and served Epaphroditus, a freedman of the emperor Nero, in Rome. Freed, he taught Stoic philosophy, and when the emperor Domitian banished the philosophers from Rome he opened a school in Greece. He wrote nothing himself: his pupil Arrian took down his talks and published them as the Discourses.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Three: Prisoners

Epictetus was lame, and an ancient story says why: his master twisted his leg to see how much he would bear, Epictetus calmly warned him it would break, and when it broke he only remarked that he had said so. Nineteen centuries later James Stockdale, an American pilot shot down over Vietnam, spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war, much of it alone and in leg irons. Afterwards he said that what he remembered of Epictetus had got him through.

Tolstoy came to think nearly everything he had written was bad art, but in *What Is Art?* he spared this story, which he had written for a reading primer for peasant children. Aksyónof finds his peace only when “the longing for home left him”, when he lets go of the wife and children Epictetus would have called no more his own than the weather. He is the innocent mind of Lovelace’s last stanza, and in the end the prison does become his hermitage: he “no longer had any desire to leave the prison”. But Lovelace had Althea “To whisper at the grates”. Aksyónof needed twenty-six years and a murderer’s tears.

DAY SEVENTY-FOUR

Music

24 minutes

Miss Brill

STORY · Katherine Mansfield, 1920 · 8 minutes

On a Sunday afternoon in a French seaside town, a lonely Englishwoman takes her fur out of its box and goes to hear the band in the park.

Miss Brill lives alone in a town in France, where she has "her English pupils"; the Jardins Publiques are its public gardens.

O Black and Unknown Bards

POEM · James Weldon Johnson, 1908 · 3 minutes

The author of 'Lift Every Voice and Sing' asks who the nameless singers were who made the spirituals.

Of the Sorrow Songs

ESSAY · W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903 · 13 minutes

The last chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, on the songs Du Bois called the greatest gift of the Black folk to America.

W. E. B. Du Bois ends *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) with this chapter. Each chapter of the book opens with a few bars of a spiritual, printed as music, which this edition leaves out. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, students of a Black college in Nashville, toured America and Europe from 1871 singing the spirituals to raise money for their school. Du Bois quotes two racial slurs of the time, from the newspapers and songs he condemns.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Four: Music

Mansfield wrote “Miss Brill” in the south of France, where she was living for her health; tuberculosis killed her a little over two years later, at thirty-four. In a letter she explained that she had chosen not just the length but the sound of every sentence, and had read the story aloud again and again, the way you would play over a piece of music, until it fitted Miss Brill.

“Yes, we understand, we understand, she thought—though what they understood she didn’t know.” That moment on the bench is close kin to the song Du Bois’s family passed down for two hundred years, “knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.” Johnson calls it “That note in music heard not with the ears”. All three pieces trust music to carry what words can’t. Only one of them lets words win: a few from a boy and a girl on a bench, and the music is over.

DAY SEVENTY-FIVE

Emigrants

26 minutes

Eveline

STORY · James Joyce, 1914 · 7 minutes

A young Dublin woman sits at the window at dusk, thinking over her decision to leave.

The New Colossus

POEM · Emma Lazarus, 1883 · 1 minute

The sonnet on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal, by a New York poet who worked with Jewish refugees from Russia.

Emma Lazarus wrote this sonnet in 1883 to help raise money for the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, France's gift to the United States, which was to stand in New York harbour. The "brazen giant" of the first line is the Colossus of Rhodes, a huge bronze statue of the sun god that stood beside the harbour of that Greek island.

America and I

ESSAY · Anzia Yezierska, 1923 · 18 minutes

A Russian-Jewish immigrant, working as a servant in New York, describes what America promised her and what she had to find for herself.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Five: Emigrants

Lazarus's statue calls herself "Mother of Exiles", but the welcome at the gate isn't always the welcome inside. Yeziarska's first employers had come from her own village, and were "ashamed to remember their mother tongue". Eveline's father curses the organ-grinder playing outside on the night her mother is dying: "Damned Italians! coming over here!"

So was Eveline wrong to stay? All we know of Frank's good fortune in Buenos Ayres is what "he said", and the only other verdict on him is her father's: "I know these sailor chaps." Joyce's own answer may be in the calendar. "Eveline" came out in a Dublin farm paper, *The Irish Homestead*, in September 1904. A few weeks later Joyce left Ireland with Nora Barnacle, a young woman from Galway who worked as a chambermaid in a Dublin hotel. They didn't marry for another twenty-seven years. Nora went.

DAY SEVENTY-SIX

Daydreams

19 minutes

The Barber's Tale of His Fifth Brother

STORY · The Thousand and One Nights, translated by John Payne, c. 900 · 13 minutes

The talkative barber of Baghdad tells of his brother, who spent his whole inheritance on a tray of glassware and sat down to imagine the profits.

In The Thousand and One Nights Shahrazad tells a story every night to keep her husband the king from killing her, and the stories nest inside one another. Here a talkative barber of Baghdad is telling the Caliph, the "Commander of the Faithful", about his six brothers; the night numbers in the text mark where Shahrazad broke off each night.

Our revels now are ended (The Tempest, Act IV, Scene 1)

POEM · William Shakespeare, 1611 · 1 minute

Prospero breaks off the masque he has conjured for the lovers, and reflects on what we are made of.

In The Tempest, Prospero, a duke overthrown and exiled to an island, rules it by magic. He has just staged a masque of spirits to celebrate the betrothal of his daughter Miranda to Ferdinand, and broken it off abruptly on remembering a plot against his life.

The Rambler No. 89 (The luxury of vain imagination)

ESSAY · Samuel Johnson, 1751 · 6 minutes

Johnson, who struggled with melancholy all his life, on the pleasures and dangers of daydreaming.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Six: Daydreams

The barber's brother doesn't dream of being rich so much as of being bowed to. The best part of his fantasy is a roomful of people begging him to "deign to look upon" his bride, and the kick that breaks the glass is aimed at someone who isn't there. Johnson has him exactly: the dreamer "enters peevish into society, because he cannot model it to his own will." The same daydream, ending in the same broken pot, is told in the ancient Indian Panchatantra, and La Fontaine made it a milkmaid who spills her milk.

Prospero's lines were given a famous twist at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), when Humphrey Bogart, holding the fake bird the others have lied and killed for, calls it "the stuff that dreams are made of". But Prospero, vexed and old, knows Johnson's cure as well as his complaint. Johnson puts "the exercises which the health of the body requires" before even conversation, and Prospero sends Ferdinand off to rest and says, "a turn or two I'll walk, / To still my beating mind."

DAY SEVENTY-SEVEN

The Fight

A longer day, 61 minutes

A Piece of Steak

STORY · Jack London, 1909 · 31 minutes

Tom King, an old prize-fighter in Sydney, wipes his plate clean with his last piece of bread on the night of a fight, and wishes he had had a piece of steak.

This story uses a racial slur of its time, for the Black American boxer Jack Johnson, who became world heavyweight champion in Sydney in 1908.

Say Not the Struggle Nought Availeth

POEM · Arthur Hugh Clough, 1849 · 1 minute

Sixteen lines for anyone who thinks he is losing, which Churchill read to the world in a broadcast in 1941.

The Fight

ESSAY · William Hazlitt, 1822 · 29 minutes

Hazlitt travels through the night from London to a field in Berkshire to see the great prize-fight of 1821, and writes one of the first classics of sports writing.

Bare-knuckle prize-fighting was against the law in Hazlitt's England and wildly popular: fights were held in open country, the place kept secret until the last moment, and thousands travelled to watch. In December 1821 Tom Hickman, "the Gas-man", fought Bill Neate near Hungerford. Jackson, Cribb and Belcher, whom Hazlitt mentions, were famous champions of the past.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Seven: The Fight

Hazlitt's coach home gives him a second fight story, and it is Tom King's. The old coachman George Stevenson takes hold of his own arm and says, "There was muscle here once, but now it is no more than this young gentleman's." He claims he really won his last fight with Broughton, but admits that Broughton could have beaten him "in his best day", and "was getting old" by then. Youth was being served in 1770 as it is in Sydney.

Hazlitt also has a word for the betting men who backed the Gas-man: "the Fancy are not men of imagination. They judge of what has been, and cannot conceive of anything that is to be." It is the mistake Clough warns against, the despair that says "as things have been they remain". Yet Tom King knows the tide in Clough's poem, coming "silent, flooding in", and for him it's the youngsters climbing through the ropes.

The "fairest hopes" Hazlitt mentions while he waits were real. He was hopelessly in love with Sarah Walker, his landlord's daughter, and would soon divorce his wife in Scotland for her sake. She turned him down, and he put it all into a strange, raw little book, *Liber Amoris*. When he says his life is "bitter as coloquintida", he means it.

Week Twelve

DAY SEVENTY-EIGHT

Art and its price

22 minutes

The Verdict

STORY · Edith Wharton, 1908 · 15 minutes

A fashionable painter has given up painting, and a friend sets out to learn why.

On the Painting of the Sistine Chapel (To Giovanni da Pistoia)

POEM · Michelangelo Buonarroti, translated by John Addington Symonds, 1510 · 1 minute

Michelangelo, head bent back under the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, tells a friend what the work is doing to his body.

From 1508 to 1512 Michelangelo, who thought of himself as a sculptor, painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican for Pope Julius II, standing on a scaffold with his head bent back. He sent this comic sonnet, with a sketch of himself at work, to his friend Giovanni da Pistoia. A crupper is the strap under a horse's tail that holds the saddle in place.

Conclusion to The Renaissance

ESSAY · Walter Pater, 1873 · 6 minutes

"To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame": the manifesto of art for art's sake.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Eight: Art and its price

Michelangelo calls his work on the Sistine ceiling “my dead pictures”, and ends, “painting is my shame.” He is half joking, with a goitre and paint dripping on his face. Gisburn, whose “Moon-dancers” had Hermia Croft saying through her tears “We shall not look upon its like again”, reaches the same verdict on his own work in earnest, and he’s right. Both painters judge themselves harder than their public ever did.

Pater would say Gisburn failed long before he stopped: “Failure is to form habits.” His art was all habit, down to “the inevitable garlanded frame”, and his “bravura tricks” crumble under the dead man’s eyes. But what is Stroud’s donkey, with “years of patient scornful persistence in every line”, if not a habit kept up for a lifetime? Pater wants us “for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions”. Would he have had the patience for Stroud?

Gisburn’s last word is that “there’s no exterminating our kind of art.” The story has had an odd afterlife of its own. In 2024 Sebastian Raschka’s textbook *Build a Large Language Model (From Scratch)* used “The Verdict” as the sample text its little AI model learns to write from.

DAY SEVENTY-NINE

Spain

20 minutes

The Golden Bracelet

STORY · Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, translated by Cornelia Frances Bates and Katharine Lee Bates, 1861 · 10 minutes

A Toledo legend: a young man in love with a proud beauty promises her anything, and she asks for the jewelled bracelet of the Virgin in the cathedral.

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the Spanish Romantic poet, set this legend in Toledo, whose cathedral holds the Virgin of the Sagrario, a revered statue of the Virgin Mary richly dressed and jewelled.

Let nothing disturb thee (St. Teresa's Book-Mark)

POEM · Teresa of Ávila, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1580 · 1 minute

Nine lines found in St Teresa's breviary after her death, in Longfellow's translation.

St Teresa of Ávila, a Carmelite nun and mystic of sixteenth-century Spain, is said to have kept these lines in her breviary, the prayer book she read every day. Longfellow's translation keeps the shape of a short prayer rather than verse lines.

Prologue to Don Quixote

ESSAY · Miguel de Cervantes, translated by John Ormsby, 1605 · 10 minutes

Cervantes, stuck for a preface, is visited by a witty friend who tells him how to fake one.

Don Quixote (1605) tells of an elderly gentleman of La Mancha who reads so many romances of chivalry that he sets out to be a knight-errant himself, with a farmer, Sancho Panza, as his squire. Books of the time opened with poems in praise of the author by famous people, and were thick with quotations from Latin writers as a show of learning.

AFTERWORD

Day Seventy-Nine: Spain

Teresa's lines end "Alone God sufficeth." Maria wants the one thing she can't have, and the mocking woman in her dream seems to say so: "it is not thine, and it will be thine never, never." Teresa offers "God never changeth" as a comfort. On the altar, the Virgin's "silent, changeless smile" calms Pedro for an instant, then frightens him more than anything yet.

Bécquer's narrator, a "scrupulous historian", won't add "a single word of my own invention". Cervantes's friend tells him to invent the lot: write his own sonnets, "baptise them", and father them on Prester John. Cervantes says his book was "begotten in a prison", and he knew prisons. Captured by pirates in 1575, he spent five years as a captive in Algiers, and in the 1590s he was jailed in Seville over shortfalls in his accounts as a tax collector. The friend promises that pedants "cannot cut off the hand you wrote it with." Cervantes had already lost the use of one, his left, to a wound at the battle of Lepanto in 1571, and Spain still calls him "el manco de Lepanto", the maimed man of Lepanto.

DAY EIGHTY

Fear

22 minutes

The Boarded Window

STORY · Ambrose Bierce, 1891 · 7 minutes

In 1830, in the forest outside Cincinnati, a man lived alone in a log cabin whose only window he had boarded up long before.

The Tiger

POEM · William Blake, 1794 · 1 minute

Blake's most famous poem (usually printed as "The Tyger"): questions put to a tiger about who could have made it.

The Aldine text (1890), with Blake's spelling and stops regularised ("Tiger"); his engraved copies have "Tyger" and erratic punctuation.

Æs Triplex

ESSAY · Robert Louis Stevenson, 1878 · 14 minutes

Stevenson, ill with his lungs since childhood, on why people live so cheerfully with death on every side, and why they are right to.

The title is Latin for "triple bronze". The Roman poet Horace wrote that the first man to trust a frail boat to the sea must have had oak and triple bronze around his heart.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty: Fear

Bierce never says it outright. Murlock's wife "passed away, apparently". In the morning the ribbon he had bound her wrists with is broken, her hands are clenched, and there is a piece of the panther's ear between her teeth. When did she really die? And whose were the "bare feet upon the floor"? Blake's poem is almost nothing but questions, and answers none of them. Bierce's story ends on a plain fact and leaves the questions to you.

Murlock lives out his life behind a boarded window, and Bierce says the knowledge of his loss "would come later, and never go." Stevenson has a phrase for a life shut away "in a parlour with a regulated temperature": it is "to die a hundred times over, and for ten years at a stretch!" "It is better to lose health like a spendthrift," he says, "than to waste it like a miser."

Stevenson lived by his essay. Ill with his lungs all his life, he sailed the South Seas and settled in Samoa, where he died suddenly in 1894, at forty-four, of a stroke rather than his lungs. His last novel, *Weir of Hermiston*, was left unfinished, as Thackeray and Dickens had "fallen in mid-course".

DAY EIGHTY-ONE

Blindness

22 minutes

The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hōichi

STORY · Lafcadio Hearn, 1904 · 13 minutes

A blind young musician at a temple by the sea is summoned at night to chant the ballad of a famous sea battle for a noble audience he cannot see.

The Heike and the Genji were two warrior clans whose war ended at the sea battle of Dan-no-ura in 1185. The tale of their struggle was chanted by blind singers to the biwa, a Japanese lute. Lafcadio Hearn, a Greek-Irish writer who settled in Japan, retold this legend in *Kwaidan* (1904).

When I consider how my light is spent

POEM · John Milton, 1673 · 1 minute

Milton, blind in his forties, asks how God can expect work from a man who can no longer see.

John Milton had gone completely blind by 1652, in his forties, while working for Cromwell's government; *Paradise Lost* was still to be written. The sonnet plays on Jesus' parable of the talents, in which a servant who buried the money his master gave him instead of using it is cast out.

The Seeing Hand (The World I Live In, Chapter 1)

ESSAY · Helen Keller, 1908 · 8 minutes

Helen Keller, deaf and blind since infancy, describes how she knows the world through her hands.

Helen Keller lost her sight and hearing to an illness before she was two. From the age of six she was taught by Anne Sullivan, who spelled words into her hand; this essay, from *The World I Live In* (1908), is about knowing the world by touch.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-One: Blindness

Hearn mentions in passing the Heiké crabs, “which have human faces on their backs”. Carl Sagan made them famous in his television series *Cosmos* (1980). For centuries, he suggested, fishermen threw back any crab that looked like a samurai’s face, out of respect for the dead, so those crabs lived to breed and the faces grew clearer.

Milton calls his gift “that one Talent which is death to hide”. Hōichi’s talent is death to use. “Your wonderful skill in music has indeed brought you into strange trouble,” the priest tells him; obey the dead again and “they will tear you in pieces.” What saves him is Milton’s last line. “Say nothing, and sit still,” the priest orders, and while the dead warrior stands beside him Hōichi stays “as still as a stone”. He also serves who only sits and waits.

Every hand that guides Hōichi leads him to the graves: the samurai’s, which “was iron”, and a woman’s along the polished floors. Keller’s hands “learned their cunning from the wise hand of another”, which “led me safely in paths that I knew not”. And the dead take Hōichi’s ears. “My hand is to me,” Keller writes, “what your hearing and sight together are to you.”

DAY EIGHTY-TWO

Wonder

29 minutes

The Mortal Immortal

STORY · Mary Shelley, 1833 · 22 minutes

Mary Shelley's best short story, by the author of *Frankenstein*.

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

POEM · Walt Whitman, 1865 · 1 minute

Eight lines from *Leaves of Grass* on two kinds of knowing.

A Piece of Chalk

ESSAY · G. K. Chesterton, 1905 · 6 minutes

Chesterton goes out to draw on the Sussex downs and discovers that white is a colour; a small essay on wonder.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Two: Wonder

Mary Shelley wrote this story in 1833, eleven years after her husband, Percy, drowned off the coast of Italy. By then she had also buried three of her four children. In 1824 she wrote in her journal that she felt like the last survivor of a beloved race, and she made that feeling into a novel, *The Last Man* (1826), about the one human being left alive on earth.

Chesterton tells the old woman he doesn't want his drawings "to endure in the least", while she talks of "toughness and endurance in the material". Winzy has drunk endurance itself, and his body becomes "too tenacious a cage for a soul which thirsts for freedom".

Whitman's astronomer has charts "to add, divide, and measure". Winzy ends up doing sums: "To have drained half the Elixir of Immortality is but to be half-immortal," he reasons, and then he wonders "by what rule the infinite may be divided". Whitman gets up, walks out into the night, and "Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars."

DAY EIGHTY-THREE

Nature, closely watched

32 minutes

A White Heron

STORY · Sarah Orne Jewett, 1886 · 17 minutes

A country girl must choose between a young hunter and the bird she alone has seen.

The Windhover

POEM · Gerard Manley Hopkins, 1918 · 1 minute

A kestrel seen one morning, in the most charged language in English poetry; Hopkins thought it his best.

A Wind-Storm in the Forests

ESSAY · John Muir, 1878 · 14 minutes

Muir goes out into a Sierra gale on purpose, to see what the forest does in it.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Three: Nature, closely watched

Sylvia's young man shoots and stuffs his birds, as naturalists then did; Audubon shot the birds he painted. But herons had a worse enemy in the 1880s. Their breeding plumes were the height of fashion on women's hats, and plume hunters shot the adults at their nests and left the young to starve, until the white herons, the egrets, had nearly vanished from the United States. In 1896 two Boston women, Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall, began holding teas to persuade their friends to give up feathered hats, and founded the Massachusetts Audubon Society. The campaign that followed brought laws that ended the trade.

Two people climb to the top of a tree today. Sylvia's pine is "like a great mainmast to the voyaging earth"; Muir, swaying in his spruce, realises that "trees are travelers". Both hang on like birds, Sylvia with bare feet and fingers that "pinched and held like bird's claws", Muir "like a bobolink on a reed". Hopkins keeps his feet on the ground and lets the bird do the climbing, and still "My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird". When the young man describes the heron, Sylvia's heart "gave a wild beat".

DAY EIGHTY-FOUR

At sea

A longer day, 52 minutes

The Open Boat

STORY · Stephen Crane, 1897 · 38 minutes

Based on Crane's own shipwreck off Florida in 1897: four men in a ten-foot dinghy, rowing for a shore they can see.

Sea-Fever

POEM · John Masefield, 1902 · 1 minute

'I must down to the seas again': the poem every schoolchild once knew, by a poet who went to sea as a boy.

Landfalls and Departures (The Mirror of the Sea)

ESSAY · Joseph Conrad, 1906 · 13 minutes

Conrad, twenty years a sailor before he was a novelist, on the first sight of land and the last.

Joseph Conrad spent twenty years at sea, in the French and then the British merchant navy, before he became a novelist. These are the first three chapters of *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906), his book of sea memories.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Four: At sea

Masefield ends with all a sailor asks: “a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover, / And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick’s over.” A trick is a turn at the wheel. In the dinghy the turns are at the oars, and all night they change hands with the same few words: “Will you spell me?” “Sure, Billie.”

Conrad says that on the last voyage “Landfall and Departure are instantaneous, merging together into one moment of supreme and final attention.” The oiler, who was “ahead in the race”, makes both at once, his forehead on the sand. Crane gives no reason why it should be Billie. The windmill on the dunes stands “with its back to the plight of the ants.”

The men were real. The Commodore sank on 2 January 1897, carrying guns to rebels in Cuba, and Crane was aboard as a correspondent on his way to the war. The captain was Edward Murphy, the cook Charles Montgomery, and the oiler, who drowned in the surf, William Higgins.

Week Thirteen

DAY EIGHTY-FIVE

Mourning

22 minutes

The Gardener

STORY · Rudyard Kipling, 1925 · 15 minutes

Helen Turrell, a respectable Englishwoman, brings up her dead brother's illegitimate son in her village; then comes the war.

After the First World War the Imperial War Graves Commission buried the British dead in cemeteries in France and Belgium, marked by rows of identical headstones, and relatives travelled out to find the graves. Kipling, whose only son was killed in 1915, served on the Commission.

In Memoriam A. H. H., VII ('Dark house, by which once more I stand')

POEM · Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1850 · 1 minute

Tennyson stands at dawn outside the London house of his dead friend Arthur Hallam.

Arthur Henry Hallam, Tennyson's closest friend and engaged to his sister, died suddenly in Vienna in 1833, aged twenty-two. In Memoriam is a sequence of short poems Tennyson wrote over the following seventeen years; in this one he stands outside Hallam's house in Wimpole Street, London.

Of Sorrow

ESSAY · Michel de Montaigne, translated by Charles Cotton, 1580 · 6 minutes

Montaigne, who says he is little subject to sorrow, collects stories of grief too great for tears.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Five: Mourning

Kipling's last words come from the Gospel of John. On Easter morning Mary Magdalene, weeping at the empty tomb, is asked "whom seekest thou?" by a man she takes for the gardener, until he speaks her name and she knows him as the risen Jesus. Kipling's gardener asks Helen the same question, and gives her the name she has never been able to claim: not aunt but mother. Tennyson goes to the same morning. He creeps to the door "At earliest morning", and "He is not here" is what the angel says at the empty tomb: "He is not here: for he is risen." Tennyson keeps the first half and stops. Nobody rises, and the day that breaks is "blank".

Montaigne says the greatest griefs strike us dumb, and that "His grief's but easie, who his grief can tell". Mrs Scarsworth has to tell hers, because she is "so tired of lying". Helen hears it and "could not speak". Which of them was carrying more?

Kipling's own son, John, went missing at Loos in 1915, the battle whose "wastage" Michael's battalion is sent to make good, and no grave of his was identified in Kipling's lifetime. For the graves of soldiers who could not be named, Kipling chose the words still cut on thousands of headstones: "Known unto God".

DAY EIGHTY-SIX

Loyalty and exile

24 minutes

The Book of Ruth

STORY · The Bible (King James Version), 1611 · 11 minutes

"Whither thou goest, I will go": a complete short story about loyalty, exile and belonging.

Our Casuarina Tree

POEM · Toru Dutt, 1882 · 3 minutes

A young Bengali poet, who died at twenty-one, remembers the tree of her childhood garden.

Of Friendship

ESSAY · Francis Bacon, 1625 · 10 minutes

"It redoubleth joys, and cutteth griefs in halves": Bacon's warmest essay.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Six: Loyalty and exile

“Ruth the Moabitess”, the book keeps calling her, as though Bethlehem can never forget where she came from. Moab was an old enemy, and the law of Moses barred Moabites from the congregation of the Lord “even to their tenth generation”. The book’s last word is the name of her great-grandson: David.

Naomi comes home saying, “I went out full and the LORD hath brought me home again empty.” Boaz sends Ruth back from the threshing floor with barley, “Go not empty unto thy mother in law,” and in the end the neighbours say, “There is a son born to Naomi.” That is Bacon’s last fruit of friendship: a friend carries on what death cuts short, so that “a man hath, as it were, two lives in his desires”. Bacon knew the other kind too. In 1601 he helped to prosecute his old patron and friend, the Earl of Essex, who was beheaded for treason.

Keats gave Ruth a homesickness the Bible never mentions. In “Ode to a Nightingale” the bird’s song may once have found “the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn.” Toru Dutt heard her tree’s lament “far, far away / In distant lands”, on the shores of “France or Italy”. The companions who played beneath it, and who “now in blessed sleep, for aye, repose”, were her brother and sister, both dead before she wrote the poem.

DAY EIGHTY-SEVEN

China and the Way

9 minutes

The Painted Wall

STORY · Pu Songling, translated by Herbert A. Giles, 1740 · 4 minutes

From *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, the great collection of the uncanny.

Year is first publication of the collection (written c. 1679).

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter

POEM · Li Bai, translated by Ezra Pound, c. 750 · 2 minutes

Pound's 1915 version of Li Bai is one of the great English poems of the century in its own right.

Nourishing the Lord of Life (Chapter 3)

ESSAY · Zhuangzi, translated by Herbert A. Giles, c. 300 BC · 4 minutes

The shortest chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, with Cook Ding, who never needed to sharpen his knife.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Seven: China and the Way

Mr. Chu stares at a wall and walks into a marriage. The river-merchant's wife, married at fourteen, does the opposite: "Lowering my head, I looked at the wall. / Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back." In both pieces a girl's hair keeps the record. The letter starts from the days when her hair "was still cut straight across my forehead", and the only proof that Mr. Chu was ever inside the painting is that the girl's "maiden tresses" are pinned up now, like a married woman's.

Zhuangzi warns against driving "the limited in search of the limitless", and his cook never forces his blade where the ox will not give. Zhuangzi is also the philosopher who dreamed he was a butterfly, and woke not knowing whether he was a man who had dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming it was a man. Pound's "paired butterflies" are only butterflies, but "They hurt me."

Pound read no Chinese. He worked from the notes of an American scholar, Ernest Fenollosa, who had studied the poems with Japanese teachers, so Li Bai reached English under his Japanese name, Rihaku, and his village of Changgan as "Chokan". T. S. Eliot called Pound "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time". The cook gave Chinese an idiom still in daily use: someone doing a hard job with ease has a blade with room to spare.

DAY EIGHTY-EIGHT

Alexandria

15 minutes

The Syracusan Women (Idyll XV)

STORY · Theocritus, translated by Andrew Lang, c. 270 BC · 7 minutes

Two housewives of Alexandria push through the crowds to the palace to see the festival of Adonis, complaining about their husbands all the way.

Theocritus, a Greek poet from Syracuse in Sicily, lived in Alexandria in Egypt in the third century BC, when it was ruled by the Greek dynasty of the Ptolemies. Gorgo and Praxinoë are Syracusan women living there, on their way to the palace festival of Adonis, the beautiful young man loved by Aphrodite, whose death and return were mourned and celebrated each year.

The God Abandons Antony

POEM · C. P. Cavafy, translated by George Valassopoulos, 1911 · 1 minute

Cavafy imagines Mark Antony at night in besieged Alexandria, hearing an invisible procession leave the city.

In 30 BC Mark Antony, the Roman general, and Cleopatra, queen of Egypt, were besieged in Alexandria by Octavian. Plutarch tells that on the night before the end, people heard music and revelry passing through the city and out of the gate toward the enemy, and took it for the god Dionysus, whom Antony loved, abandoning him. Cavafy, a Greek poet, lived in Alexandria all his adult life.

The Poetry of C. P. Cavafy

ESSAY · E. M. Forster, 1919 · 7 minutes

Forster, in Alexandria during the First World War, introduces English readers to the Greek poet he met there, 'standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe'.

E. M. Forster, the English novelist, spent much of the First World War in Alexandria working for the Red Cross, and came to know Cavafy there. This essay, from his book *Pharos and Pharillon* (1923), helped to make Cavafy known in English.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Eight: Alexandria

Gorgo and Praxinoë fight through a crowd to a show put on by Ptolemy and his queen. In “Alexandrian Kings”, the poem Forster quotes, another crowd runs to see Cleopatra’s sons crowned, although “they knew perfectly well how worthless, / what empty words, were these king-makings.” The two crowds are some 240 years apart, and the same family rules both. Cavafy’s “blood of the Lagidæ” means the Ptolemies. Theocritus’s queen, Arsinoë, was the king’s sister as well as his wife, and Cleopatra was the last of the line. Caesarion, the boy in rose-coloured silk hailed as “King of Kings”, was put to death on Octavian’s orders soon after Antony died.

Both Theocritus and Cavafy end in a farewell. Gorgo’s is to a god who will be back next year: “may you find us glad at your next coming!” Antony’s is to a city that is leaving for good, and Cavafy asks him to make it “like a brave man”. Forster ends on the same note: “either life entails courage, or it ceases to be life.”

The office Forster sees Cavafy walking to was the irrigation service, where he worked as a clerk for some thirty years. He never published a book of his poems; he printed them himself on loose sheets and gave them to friends. Leonard Cohen turned “The God Abandons Antony” into a song, “Alexandra Leaving”.

DAY EIGHTY-NINE
Harlem, 1925–1926

29 minutes

Sweat

STORY · Zora Neale Hurston, 1926 · 19 minutes

Hurston's breakthrough story, from the one issue of the Harlem Renaissance magazine *Fire!!*

The story is set among Black working people in a small Florida town, and its characters speak in their own dialect, racial slurs included.

Yet Do I Marvel

POEM · Countee Cullen, 1925 · 1 minute

The signature sonnet of the Harlem Renaissance, by its youngest star.

Two figures from Greek myth, punished forever in the underworld: Tantalus, who stands in water under a fruit tree, and both pull away whenever he reaches for them; and Sisyphus, who must push a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down each time.

The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain

ESSAY · Langston Hughes, 1926 · 9 minutes

The manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance, written when Hughes was 24.

Hughes uses "Negro", the usual word of his time, and once quotes a racial slur.

The "young Negro poet" in the first paragraph is Countee Cullen.

AFTERWORD

Day Eighty-Nine: Harlem, 1925–1926

Hughes's young poet who wants to be "a poet—not a Negro poet" is usually taken to be Countee Cullen. Does "Yet Do I Marvel" prove Hughes right or wrong? It is a sonnet in the old English manner, full of Greek myth, and its last line is about nothing but being black.

Hurston's story is the art Hughes was asking for: "the low-down folks", in their own talk, with nobody made respectable for the Philadelphia clubwoman. Its porch was real. Joe Clarke kept the store in Eatonville, Florida, the all-Black town where Hurston grew up.

Cullen can't say why God allows suffering: His ways are "Inscrutable". Delia is surer: "whatever goes over the Devil's back, is got to come under his belly." Once she has found the snake in her own basket, she tells herself, "Gawd knows taint mah fault." Is it?

Hughes's essay came out in *The Nation* in June 1926, as an answer to George Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum", which had called the idea of a separate Negro art in America nonsense. Hurston died poor in 1960 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Florida. In 1973 the novelist Alice Walker found the spot and set up a stone calling her "A Genius of the South".

DAY NINETY

A woman alone

21 minutes

The Story of an Hour

STORY · Kate Chopin, 1894 · 4 minutes

A thousand words that hold a whole life; one of the most taught stories in American literature.

Standard Ebooks uses its original magazine title, "The Dream of an Hour".

I, being born a woman and distressed

POEM · Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1923 · 1 minute

A sonnet that coolly turns the tables on centuries of love sonnets.

The Solitude of Self

ESSAY · Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1892 · 16 minutes

Stanton's farewell address to the suffrage movement, which she considered her best speech.

AFTERWORD

Day Ninety: A woman alone

The last words of Chopin's story belong to the doctors. They say it was joy that killed Louise, and they are right, though not about which joy. Stanton's whole speech is against the presumption of speaking for a woman, and it closes on a question Louise had already answered for herself, in her hour at the window: "Who, I ask you, can take, dare take, on himself the rights, the duties, the responsibilities of another human soul?" A kind intention, Louise decides, makes it "no less a crime".

Millay's speaker and Louise are both "possessed". The speaker is possessed by desire, and refuses to call it love. Louise is possessed by "self-assertion", and doesn't stop to ask whether it is "a monstrous joy". She had loved her husband "sometimes. Often she had not."

Vogue first printed the story in 1894 as "The Dream of an Hour". Stanton reminds the committee that suffragists had been asking for "a sixteenth amendment" for twenty years. Women's suffrage came as the nineteenth, in 1920, eighteen years after she died.

DAY NINETY-ONE

Deep time

A longer day, 54 minutes

The Star

STORY · H. G. Wells, 1897 · 18 minutes

On the first day of the new year astronomers announce that a dark body from outer space has entered the solar system.

This story uses the racial terms of its time, one of them now a slur.

Fire and Ice

POEM · Robert Frost, 1920 · 1 minute

Nine lines on how the world will end.

On a Piece of Chalk

ESSAY · Thomas Henry Huxley, 1868 · 36 minutes

A lecture to Norwich workingmen that reads the whole history of the earth in a carpenter's chalk.

Thomas Henry Huxley, the biologist known as "Darwin's bulldog", gave this lecture to working men at Norwich in 1868, when the British Association for the Advancement of Science met there.

AFTERWORD

Day Ninety-One: Deep time

Before telling his students that “Man has lived in vain”, the master mathematician “carefully selected a large piece of chalk”. Huxley would have told him what he was holding: the floor of an old sea, built of skeletons no more than “a hundredth of an inch” across. Wells could have heard it from Huxley himself: in 1884 he went to London to study biology under him.

Huxley tells his Norwich audience that there was “no grand catastrophe—no destroyer” sweeping away one age’s life to make room for the next. But the age of the chalk ended much as Wells imagined the world nearly ending. About 66 million years ago an asteroid struck what is now Mexico, and the pterodactyls, plesiosaurs and ammonites that Huxley says vanish with the chalk died in the blast and in the years of dark and cold that followed. Frost’s choice turned out to be both: fire first, then ice.

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Reading times assume 250 words a minute for prose and 150 for poetry. Set in Junicode.