



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

REFLECTIONS

# How to write a LOVE SONG

JOHN DREW

500 years ago, Edmund Spenser wrote a poem to celebrate a wedding taking place beside the River Thames. Each stanza ends with the refrain: "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song".

We don't write Elizabethan-style poems any more but the first great Modernist poem, T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland", picks up on this catchy refrain. And so does a love song by a '60s folk singer, Ewan MacColl. If you know a catchy line—or two or more—from the past, go with it. The something inside you that responds to it means it is part of you too.

A good love song does not want soggy, abstract images: I love you, scooby-dooby-doo. Boo hoo hoo. Of course boo hoo, we're crying inside—or out—but a good song or poem requires the distancing of a concrete image. Together with a good tune or beat, like a ballad.

Spenser's. He wants only the first half of it for his refrain (the last half can simply echo in your head if you know the original). He also changes the word "run" to "flow"—as many of us do when misremembering the line. "Sweet Thames, flow softly".

Ewan adds a variant line to tee up this refrain, one that emphasises the femininity of the river: "Flow, sweet river, flow". While the dominant image for the—always unknown, taken for granted—woman is established as the river, that for the man, the singer, is quickly shown to be that of London.

Ewan met his girl—"me girl", he says with a touch of Cockney accent, dialect always good in ballads—on Woolwich Pier, beneath the big crane standing. We are still—just in the days when big ships from across the world came up to the East India and West India Docks. His love for her passes all—rhyme can be effective when it is not clichéd and banal—understanding.

**Poets may care to eavesdrop on this note for song-writers. If you have been advised that the Subcon ear cannot hear the native stresses of Blighty, the best way to attune your ear to them is by singing ballads (once you have stopped chanting nursery rhymes)—as the Blighters themselves do since their stresses in ordinary speech are not iambic.**

But then, just when love had set his heart a-burning he, blinded by this, never saw the tide was turning. The voice of the singer, unaccompanied, becomes prosaic as he recognises winter's frost has touched his heart. Now a creeping fog is on the river, sun and moon and stars gone with her. That's it, all over with the sweet river softly flowing. Swift the Thames runs to the sea, bearing ships and "part of me".

So there it is. What more do you need? Ewan MacColl's master-class in how to write a love song—or poem. He has an idea, what Eliot calls an objective correlative, and he finds a structure for it—and it is extraordinary how much rhythm gets generated by your delight once you hit upon a fresh idea.

Ewan takes a traditional ballad form and steals a good line, calls it tradition, from an old love poem. The theme is also conventional enough. Love starts in wonder and ends in tragedy. Or at least pathos. Nothing new there.

What is new is that the writer finds a fresh idea and delights in developing a love poem out of the image of the flow and ebb of a river through the riverside districts of a city. Perhaps you do something like with the Padma, the Meghna, heavens know, even the Turag? The impulse comes from hitting on a new image for yourself.

If you are "the girl", you may want to turn Ewan's perspective—from the as yet unliberated Hippy '60s—inside out and upside down. Wretched feller, bothering you on Woolwich Pier.

Wendy Cope writes a wry love poem of sorts also set in London. Positioning herself at a bus stop, she compares "bloody men" to bloody buses that never seem to come along. Or, if and when they do, they appear in convoys of three.

Not that Cope's perspective will be yours either. Times have changed. And places are different. Poems have even been known about the streets of Dhaka. Familiar places go well with familiar faces. You might do it with the capital and its districts, its suburbs or other towns in the country.

Wherever and whenever you are, the principles of composition, image and rhythm, remain the same. And reflecting on the unhappiness of being in love, the sheer cussedness of life, is an ideal time to enjoy writing. Thomas Hardy's wife Florence once remarked at seeing him happily writing a sad poem. Therapy. Go for it.

John Drew is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star. A collection of his articles is due to be published later this year by ULAB Press.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

For those of you who don't want to riff off the rap form used by Spenser's Elizabethan contemporary, John Skelton, the ballad is a hardy perennial.

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Rivers? No need to tell Bangladeshis about rivers and songs about rivers. The Thames is just a nullah compared with the great rivers of Bengal but London being situated on it has given rise to so many stories it has become mythic. Especially, in imperial times: read, if you haven't, Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*.

Mythically, rivers are invariably seen as feminine, being fluid, as against mountains being fixed, inflexible and hence—if you'll pardon the stereotype—masculine!

And so to Ewan MacColl. He wants to write a love song and he picks up this line of

He took her sailing on the river, proclaiming that London Town was his to give her. Verse by verse, four beats to each line, his courting continued apace as they proceeded up the river on the flowing tide, passing well-known landmarks.

At London Yard he took her hand, at Blackwall Point he faced her, at the Isle of Dogs he kissed her mouth and tenderly embraced her.

This is followed by a stanza containing the lines of the refrain. Heard the bells of Greenwich ringing, flow, sweet river, flow, all the time my heart was singing, "sweet Thames flow softly".

You will get the idea by now. Keep going upriver through London, giving your girl this and that part of riverside London as a brooch, it may be, a ribbon, a necklace, a ring, a bracelet.

He kissed her once again at Wapping and after that there was no stopping, flow, sweet river, flow, and he, having declared his love for her from Rotherhithe to Putney Bridge, left London behind as she from Kew to Isleworth swears her love for him.

POETRY

## A pressed flower

ARSHI MORTUZA

I.  
Pressed between pages  
Of a heavy book, a rose—  
Neither flourishes nor wilts.  
II.  
You planted me where  
I'll never bloom. Uprooted—  
Wilting among words.  
III.  
Like a pressed flower—  
Trapped inside a storybook  
That you chose for me.  
IV.  
You lied when you said  
That I will smell as sweet by  
Any other name.

Arshi Mortuza, author of *One Minute Past Midnight*, is an ESL teacher based in Canada. Her works have been included in *Kitaab*, *Borderless*, and *World Poetry Today*.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

## Small dreams

SNATA BASU

On the heart of a place where heather blossoms,  
Dreams of scattered bodies and burnt heath  
Against the walls where children live  
to dream of eating sugar and bread  
while their brother lies in a concrete ditch  
brews cold fury we cannot forgive,  
we have come too far to repent now.  
Far away in a land where guns loot  
The scarred wounds of a newborn child,  
There are dreams of living to see another day,  
Another night that fades to strong daylight.  
And the dreams to fight til the end,  
Where clean water cruises past the earth  
Plagued with blue,  
I see tiny stars bursting in flames  
in the horizon, where there was once a house  
Brimming with laughter; and the aroma of  
freshly cooked Maftoul  
floated in the air and through the perky windows,  
that are now tarred with the stench of revolting  
black smoke  
and powder; small dreams live to see the spirit  
die,  
small dreams are just passersby.

Snata Basu is an aspiring poet from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her work mostly centres on passionate, personal bindings. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature at North South University.

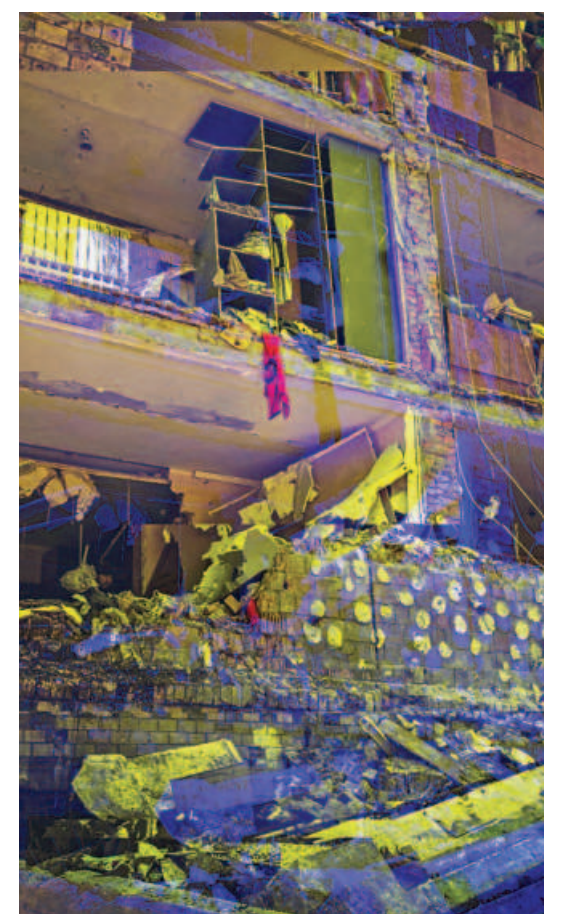


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