

## Half-caste

- Excuse me  
standing on one leg  
I'm half-caste
- 5 Explain yusef  
wha yu mean  
when you say half-caste  
yu mean when picasso  
mix red an green  
is a half-caste canvas/  
10 explain yusef  
wha yu mean  
when yu say half-caste  
yu mean when light an shadow  
mix in de sky  
15 is a half-caste weather/  
well in dat case  
england weather  
nearly always half-caste  
in fact some o dem cloud  
20 half-caste till dem overcast  
so spiteful dem dont want de sun pass  
ah rass/  
explain yusef  
wha yu mean  
25 when you say half-caste  
yu mean tchaikovsky  
sit down at dah piano  
an mix a black key  
wid a white key  
30 is a half-caste symphony/
- Explain yusef  
wha yu mean  
Ah listening to yu wid de keen  
half of mih ear  
35 Ah lookin at yu wid de keen  
half of mih eye  
and when I'm introduced to yu  
I'm sure you'll understand  
why I offer yu half-a-hand  
40 an when I sleep at night  
I close half-a-eye  
consequently when I dream  
I dream half-a-dream  
an when moon begin to glow  
45 I half-caste human being  
cast half-a-shadow  
but yu must come back tomorrow  
wid de whole of yu eye  
an de whole of yu ear  
50 an de whole of yu mind  
  
an I will tell yu  
de other half  
of my story

*John Agard*

**Parade's End**

Dad parked our Granada, champagne-gold  
 by our superstore on Blackstock Road,  
 my brother's eyes scanning the men  
 who scraped the pavement frost to the dole, 25  
 5 one 'got on his bike' over the hill  
 or the few who warmed us a thumbs-up  
 for the polished recovery of our re-sprayed car.

Council mums at our meat display  
 nestled against a pane with white trays 30  
 10 swilling kidneys, liver and a sandy block  
 of corned beef, loud enough about the way  
 darkies from down south *Come op ta*  
*Yorksha, mekkin claaims on aut theh can*  
*befoh buggrin off in theh flash caahs!*

15 At nine, we left the emptied till open,  
 clicked the dials of the safe. Bolted  
 two metal bars across the back door  
 (with a new lock). Spread trolleys  
 at ends of the darkened aisles. Then we pressed  
 20 the code for the caged alarm and rushed  
 the precinct to check it was throbbing red.

Thundering down the graffiti of shutters  
 against the valley of high-rise flats.  
 Ready for the getaway to our cul-de-sac'd  
 semi-detached, until we stood stock-still:  
 watching the car-skin pucker, bubbling smarts  
 of acid. In the unstoppable pub-roar  
 from the John O'Gaunt across the forecourt,

We returned up to the shop, lifted a shutter,  
 30 queued at the sink, walked down again.  
 Three of us, each carrying pans of cold water.  
 Then we swept away the bonnet-leaves  
 from gold to the brown of our former colour.

*Daljit Nagra*

## Belfast Confetti

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining  
exclamation marks,

Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the  
explosion.

Itself - an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst  
of rapid fire .

I was trying to complete a sentence in my head but it kept  
stuttering,

5 All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and  
colons.

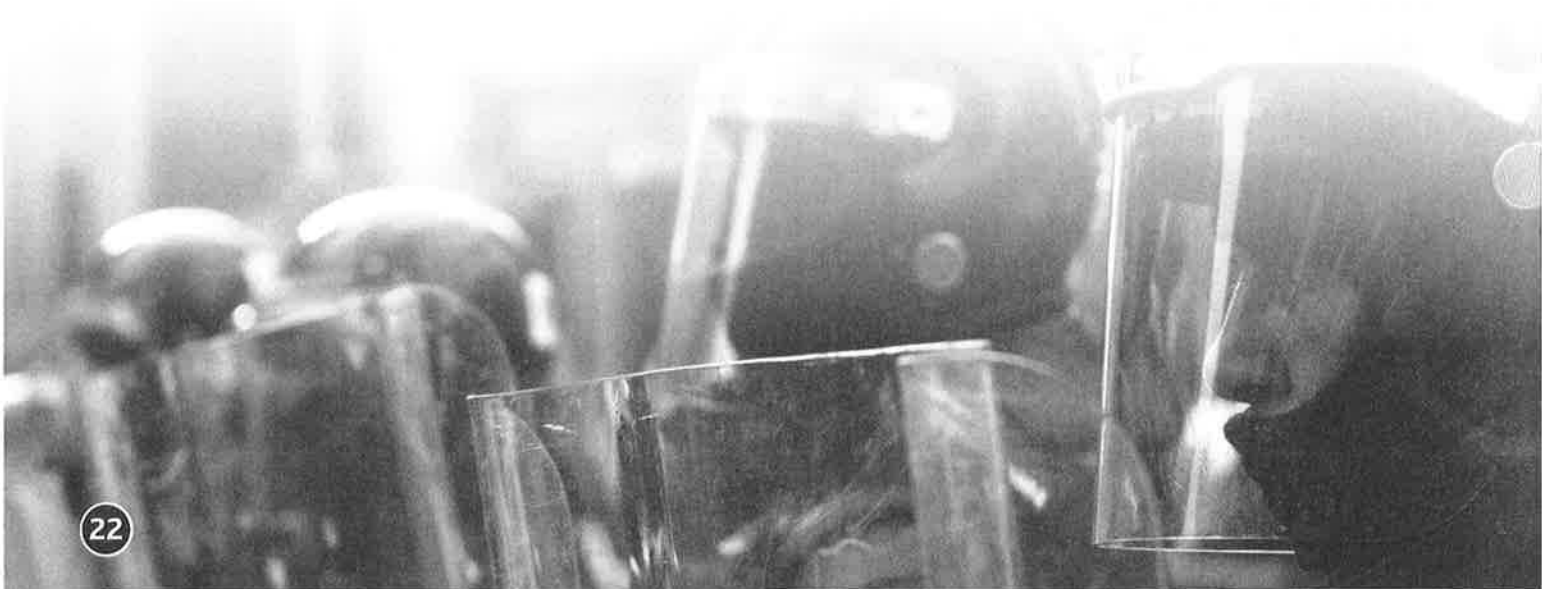
I know this labyrinth so well - Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman,  
Odessa Street -

Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea  
Street. Dead end again.

A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-  
talkies. What is

My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A  
fusillade of question-marks.

*Ciaran Carson*



## Our Sharpeville

I was playing hopscotch on the slate  
when miners roared past in lorries,  
their arms raised, signals at a crossing,  
their chanting foreign and familiar,  
5 like the call and answer of road gangs  
across the veld, building hot arteries  
from the heart of the Transvaal mine.

I ran to the gate to watch them pass.  
And it seemed like a great caravan  
10 moving across the desert to an oasis  
I remembered from my Sunday School book:  
olive trees, a deep jade pool,  
men resting in clusters after a long journey,  
the danger of the mission still around them  
15 and night falling, its silver stars just like the ones  
you got for remembering your Bible texts.

Then my grandmother called from behind the front door,  
her voice a stiff broom over the steps:  
'Come inside; they do things to little girls.'

20 For it was noon, and there was no jade pool.  
Instead, a pool of blood that already had a living name  
and grew like a shadow as the day lengthened.  
The dead, buried in voices that reached even my gate,  
the chanting men on the ambushed trucks,  
25 these were not heroes in my town,  
but maulers of children,  
doing things that had to remain nameless.  
And our Sharpeville was this fearful thing  
that might tempt us across the wellswept streets.

30 If I had turned I would have seen  
brocade curtains drawn tightly across sheer net ones,  
known there were eyes behind both,  
heard the dogs pacing in the locked yard next door.  
But, walking backwards, all I felt was shame,  
35 at being a girl, at having been found at the gate,  
at having heard my grandmother lie  
and at my fear her lie might be true.  
Walking backwards, called back,  
I returned to the closed rooms, home.

*Ingrid de Kok*

## Exposure

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us...  
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...  
Low, drooping flares confuse our memories of the salient...  
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,  
5 But nothing happens.

Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,  
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.  
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.  
10 What are we doing here?

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...  
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy,  
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army  
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,  
15 But nothing happens.

Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence,  
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,  
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,  
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's nonchalance,  
20 But nothing happens.

Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces –  
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, sun-dw-  
dazed,  
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,  
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses  
25 Is it that we are dying?

Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed  
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;  
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: The house is theirs,  
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed, –  
30 We turn back to our dying.

Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn,  
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit,  
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;  
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here: therefore were born,  
35 For love of God seems dying.

Tonight, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,  
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp,  
The burying party, picks and shovels in the shaking grasp,  
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  
40 But nothing happens.

Wilfred Owen



## Catrin

I can remember you, child,  
As I stood in a hot, white  
Room at the window watching  
The people and cars taking  
5 Turn at the traffic lights.  
I can remember you, our first  
Fierce confrontation, the tight  
Red rope of love which we both  
Fought over. It was a square  
10 Environmental blank, disinfected  
Of paintings or toys. I wrote  
All over the walls with my  
Words, coloured the clean squares  
With the wild, tender circles  
15 Of our struggle to become  
Separate. We want, we shouted,  
To be two, to be ourselves.

Neither won nor lost the struggle  
In the glass tank clouded with feelings  
20 Which changed us both. Still I am fighting  
You off, as you stand there  
With your straight, strong, long  
Brown hair and your rosy,  
Defiant glare, bringing up  
25 From the heart's pool that old rope,  
Tightening about my life,  
Trailing love and conflict,  
As you ask may you skate  
In the dark, for one more hour.

*Gillian Clarke*

**Your Dad Did What?**

Where they have been, if they have been away,  
or what they've done at home, if they have not –  
you make them write about the holiday.

One writes *My Dad did*. What? Your Dad did what?

- 5 That's not a sentence. Never mind the bell.  
We stay behind until the work is done.  
You count their words (you who can count and spell);  
all the assignments are complete bar one

and though this boy seems bright, that one is his.

- 10 He says he's finished, doesn't want to add  
anything, hands it in just as it is.  
No change. *My Dad did*. What? What did his Dad?

You find the 'E' you gave him as you sort  
through reams of what this girl did, what that lad did,

- 15 and read the line again, just one 'e' short:  
*This holiday was horrible. My Dad did.*

*Sophie Hannah*



my dad  
did

## The Class Game

- How can you tell what class I'm from?  
I can talk posh like some  
With an 'Olly in me mouth  
Down me nose, wear an 'at not a scarf
- 5 With me second-hand clothes.  
So why do you always wince when you hear  
Me say 'Tara' to me 'Ma' instead of 'Bye Mummy  
    dear'?
- How can you tell what class I'm from?  
'Cos we live in a corpy, not like some
- 10 In a pretty little semi, out Wirral way  
And commute into Liverpool by train each day?  
Or did I drop my unemployment card  
Sitting on your patio (We have a yard)?
- How can you tell what class I'm from?
- 15 Have I a label on me head, and another on me bum?  
Or is it because my hands are stained with toil?  
Instead of soft lily-white with perfume and oil?  
Don't I crook me little finger when I drink me tea  
Say toilet instead of bog when I want to pee?
- 20 Why do you care what class I'm from?  
Does it stick in your gullet like a sour plum?  
Well, mate! A cleaner is me mother  
A docker is me brother  
Bread pudding is wet nelly
- 25 And me stomach is me belly  
And I'm proud of the class that I come from.

*Mary Casey*



**Cousin Kate**

I was a cottage-maiden  
 Hardened by sun and air,  
 Contented with my cottage-mates,  
 Not mindful I was fair.  
 5 Why did a great lord find me out  
 And praise my flaxen hair?  
 Why did a great lord find me out  
 To fill my heart with care?  
  
 He lured me to his palace-home –  
 10 Woe's me for joy thereof –  
 To lead a shameless shameful life,  
 His plaything and his love.  
 He wore me like a golden knot,  
 He changed me like a glove:  
 15 So now I moan an unclean thing  
 Who might have been a dove.  
  
 O Lady Kate, my Cousin Kate,  
 You grow more fair than I:  
 He saw you at your father's gate,  
 20 Chose you and cast me by.  
 He watched your steps along the lane,  
 Your sport among the rye:  
 He lifted you from mean estate  
 To sit with him on high.

25 Because you were so good and pure  
 He bound you with his ring:  
 The neighbours call you good and pure,  
 Call me an outcast thing.  
 Even so I sit and howl in dust  
 30 You sit in gold and sing:  
 Now which of us has tenderer heart?  
 You had the stronger wing.  
  
 O Cousin Kate, my love was true,  
 Your love was writ in sand:  
 35 If he had fooled not me but you,  
 If you stood where I stand,  
 He had not won me with his love  
 Nor bought me with his land:  
 I would have spit into his face  
 40 And not have taken his hand.  
  
 Yet I've a gift you have not got  
 And seem not like to get:  
 For all your clothes and wedding-ring  
 I've little doubt you fret.  
 45 My fair-haired son, my shame, my pride,  
 Cling closer, closer yet:  
 Your sire would give broad lands for one  
 To wear his coronet.

*Christina Rossetti*

## Hitcher

I'd been tired, under  
the weather, but the ansaphone kept screaming:  
*One more sick-note, mister, and you're finished. Fired.*  
I thumbed a lift to where the car was parked.  
5 A Vauxhall Astra. It was hired.

I picked him up in Leeds.  
He was following the sun to west from east  
with just a toothbrush and the good earth for a bed. The truth,  
he said, was blowin' in the wind,  
10 or round the next bend.

I let him have it  
on the top road out of Harrogate – once  
with the head, then six times with the krooklok  
in the face – and didn't even swerve.  
15 I dropped it into third

and leant across  
to let him out, and saw him in the mirror  
bouncing off the kerb, then disappearing down the verge.  
We were the same age, give or take a week.  
20 He'd said he liked the breeze

to run its fingers  
through his hair. It was twelve noon.  
The outlook for the day was moderate to fair.  
Stitch that, I remember thinking,  
25 you can walk from there.

*Simon Armitage*

## The Drum

I hate that drum's discordant sound,  
Parading round, and round, and round:  
To thoughtless youth it pleasure yields,  
And lures from cities and from fields,  
5 To sell their liberty for charms  
Of tawdry lace, and glittering arms;  
And when Ambition's voice commands,  
To march, and fight, and fall, in foreign lands.

I hate that drum's discordant sound,  
10 Parading round, and round, and round:  
To me it talks of ravaged plains,  
And burning towns, and ruined swains,  
And mangled limbs, and dying groans,  
And widows' tears, and orphans' moans;  
15 And all that Misery's hand bestows,  
To fill the catalogue of human woes.

*John Scott*

## O What is that Sound

- O what is that sound which so thrills the ear  
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?  
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,  
The soldiers coming.
- 5 O what is that light I see flashing so clear  
Over the distance brightly, brightly?  
Only the sun on their weapons, dear,  
As they step lightly.
- 10 O what are they doing with all that gear  
What are they doing this morning, this morning?  
Only their usual manoeuvres, dear,  
Or perhaps a warning.
- O why have they left the road down there,  
Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?  
15 Perhaps a change in their orders, dear,  
Why are you kneeling?
- O haven't they stopped for the doctor's care,  
Haven't they reined their horses, their horses?  
20 Why, they are none of them wounded, dear,  
None of these forces.
- O is it the parson they want, with white hair,  
Is it the parson, is it, is it?  
No, they are passing his gateway, dear,  
Without a visit.

- 25 O it must be the farmer who lives so near.  
It must be the farmer so cunning, so cunning?  
They have passed the farmyard already, dear,  
And now they are running.

- O where are you going? Stay with me here!  
30 Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving?  
No, I promised to love you, dear,  
But I must be leaving.

- O it's broken the lock and splintered the door,  
O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;  
35 Their boots are heavy on the floor  
And their eyes are burning.

W. H. Auden



## Conscientious Objector

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.

I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear  
the clatter on the barn-floor.

He is in haste; he has business in Cuba, business in the  
Balkans, many calls to make this morning.

But I will not hold the bridle while he cinches the girth.

5 And he may mount by himself; I will not give him a leg up.

Though he flick my shoulders with his whip, I will not  
tell him which way the fox ran.

With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where the  
black boy hides in the swamp.

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am  
not on his pay-roll.

I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of  
my enemies either.

10 Though he promises me much, I will not map him the  
route to any man's door.

*Edna St. Vincent Millay*

**August 6, 1945**

In the Enola Gay  
five minutes before impact  
he whistles a dry tune

Later he will say  
5 that the whole blooming sky  
went up like an apricot ice.  
Later he will laugh and tremble  
at such a surrender, for the eye  
of his belly saw Marilyn's skirts  
10 fly over her head for ever

On the river bank,  
bees drizzle over  
hot white rhododendrons

Later she will walk  
15 the dust, a scarlet girl  
with her whole stripped skin  
at her heel, stuck like an old  
shoe sole or mermaid's tail

Later she will lie down  
20 in the flecked black ash  
where the people are become  
as lizards or salamanders  
and, blinded, she will complain:  
Mother you are late, so late

25 Later in dreams he will look  
down shrieking and see  
                    ladybirds  
                    ladybirds

*Alison Fell*



# Clashes and collisions

## Invasion

Soon they will come. First we will hear  
the sound of their boots approaching at dawn  
then they'll appear through the mist.

In their death-bringing uniforms  
5 they will march towards our homes  
their guns and tanks pointing forward.

They will be confronted by young men  
with rusty guns and boiling blood.  
These are our young men  
10 who took their short-lived freedom for granted.

We will lose this war, and blood  
will cover our roads, mix with our  
drinking water, it will creep into our dreams.

Keep your head down and stay in doors –  
15 we've lost this war before it has begun.

*Choman Hardi*