

POETRY SELECTED BY R V BAILEY

If Only

It is the schoolgirls who come out first
Angry, tearful, running across playgrounds
Leaving their books and their jotters open
Their teachers follow them, and together
Shouting they take to the streets

The old women hear them, see them from their windows
And come out in wheelchairs and walking frames
They leave their firesides and their daytime TV
Leave their bingo and their drawing classes
Leave their kitchens and gardens, their afternoon naps
Their pensioners' lunches and their reading groups
With the children they take to the streets

By now word has got round and the whole world knows
Women leave sewing machines idle in Shanghai sweatshops
Buckets half filled at wells in India, rugs unwoven in Egypt
They leave the beaches in Australia and Argentina
They leave the brothels in Thailand and Saigon
They leave health centres and care homes and nurseries
Hair salons and hotel receptions
They leave parliamentary committees and research labs
Law courts, surgeries and consulting rooms
They leave studios and drawing boards
Rehearsals, lecture theatres and boardrooms
Together they take to the streets

Then the mothers and housewives come
Leaving floors un-mopped, phones unanswered
Dinners uncooked, washing un-hung
Trolleys abandoned in the aisles of supermarkets
Children unfed and husbands unnerved

When half the world has taken to the streets
The world itself falls silent, waiting
And the man
Who was going to shoot the little girl on her way to school
Puts down his gun
And walks away

Elizabeth Hare

At the '100 women' conference at the BBC in October 2013 Zainab Bangura, the delegate from Sierra Leone, spoke about Malala and said that if a young girl was ever again shot for trying to go to school all the women in the world should take to the streets.