

This Is the Dark Time, My Love

Matthew Williams • English Literature • March 18, 2026

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This is the dark time, my love,

Analysis: The repetition "This is the dark time, my love" establishes a persistent state of oppression. The phrase "my love" personalizes the suffering: the speaker addresses someone beloved, perhaps a partner, perhaps the nation itself. Crucially, calling it a "dark time" rather than "a dark forever" implies this is a season, a temporary state: the word carries quiet hope that it will eventually pass, like winter. The poem also alludes to the "Dark Ages", a period of ignorance and tyranny, framing colonial occupation as a return to barbarism.

All round the land brown beetles crawl about.

Analysis: The metaphor "brown beetles" dehumanizes the soldiers, presenting them as pests: numerous, invasive, and destructive. Beetles are the largest group of organisms on Earth; they can live almost anywhere and have a natural body armour (their carapace). Comparing soldiers to beetles suggests they are both overwhelming in number and protected from consequence. "All round the land" creates a sense of encirclement: there is no direction free of their presence, nowhere to run. The word "crawl" carries a precise military connotation, evoking soldiers moving on their bellies, slow and deliberate. The alliteration of b-sounds, "brown beetles... about", creates a heavy, crawling rhythm that enacts the marching of boots across the land.

The shining sun is hidden in the sky

Analysis: The symbolism "shining sun" represents hope, freedom, and clarity. Crucially, the sun is hidden, not extinguished; it is still there, still shining, behind the clouds. This is pathetic fallacy: the sky reflects the political situation, but hope is not dead, only obscured. The sun is also the colour of the Guyanese flag (gold/yellow), along with the red of the flowers and the green of the grass below, giving the poem a hidden visual patriotism.

Red flowers bend their heads in awful sorrow.

Analysis: The personification "flowers bend their heads in awful sorrow" gives nature human grief, suggesting that suffering is so widespread it affects even the environment. The symbolism of "red flowers" is layered: they evoke blood and death; they also allude to poppies, the symbol of WWI remembrance; but here, no tribute is being paid to the British soldiers, because in this poem the British are the aggressors, not the heroes. Red flowers are also a traditional romantic gift: the speaker addresses his "love" throughout the poem, but even the flowers he might want to offer are bent in mourning. The occupation has poisoned not only public life but private love itself.

This is the dark time, my love,

Analysis: The repetition "This is the dark time, my love" reinforces that this condition dominates all aspects of life. It is not momentary but ongoing and inescapable.

It is the season of oppression, dark metal, and tears.

Analysis: The symbolism "dark metal" represents weapons and military machinery. Referring to oppression as a "season" is significant: it implies temporality, a phase that will eventually give way to another. The poem frames suffering not as permanent but as cyclical, which preserves the possibility of change.

It is the festival of guns, the carnival of misery.

Analysis: The two oxymorons, "festival of guns" and "carnival of misery", juxtapose celebration with violence and suffering. A festival and a carnival are occasions of joy; guns and misery are their opposites. The effect is to show that what is happening is a celebration, but only for the colonisers. For the Guyanese people, the very same events are a carnival of misery. One people's victory parade is another people's funeral march.

Everywhere the faces of men are strained and anxious.

Analysis: The imagery reflects widespread psychological distress. "Strained" suggests people worn to their limits, pulled in every direction by fear; "anxious" is the chronic state of those who do not know whether they will survive the day or what will happen to their families. The suffering is collective: it is not isolated individuals but everywhere, every face, the entire male population visible in public space. The men carry the tension of wives, children, and communities depending on them while powerless to protect anyone.

Who comes walking in the dark night time?

Analysis: The rhetorical question "Who comes walking in the dark night time?" builds suspense and introduces an unseen, threatening presence. Notice the shift in language: in the opening lines it is the "dark time"; here it has become the "dark night time". The darkness has deepened across the poem. In the first stanza the sun was only hidden; by the third stanza the word "night" has entered, suggesting that whatever light remained is now gone entirely. The oppression has moved from a season of shadow to something closer to total darkness.

Whose boot of steel tramps down the slender grass?

Analysis: The metaphor "boot of steel" represents military force and oppression, cold and industrial, against the natural world. "Slender grass" symbolizes fragility and innocence, but it also represents something more specific: the growth and potential of Guyana itself, a young nation trying to develop, being crushed before it can reach its full height. The verb "tramps" is deliberate; it is not a single step but a repeated, grinding action, something done without thought or care, as if the land and everything growing in it is simply in the way.

It is the man of death, my love, the strange invader

Analysis: The personification "man of death" may refer to the soldiers, but it may also be Death itself, the personified Grim Reaper walking through the streets. "Strange invader" carries a double meaning: foreign (from outside the country) but also alien, inhuman, something so threatening it does not feel like a person at all.

Watching you sleep and aiming at your dream.

Analysis: The metaphor "aiming at your dream" is the poem's most precise final image. Oppression does not only kill people; it kills psychological freedom: the dreams, ambitions, and futures that people imagine for themselves. The man of death is not just a soldier; he is the destruction of possibility itself, watching while the beloved sleeps, aiming at what they aspire to become.

About the poem

Author: Martin Carter (1927–1997)

Context: Written during the British suspension of constitutional government in Guyana, 1953. Carter was imprisoned by the British colonial authorities for his political activism. The poem comes directly from his experience of occupation and resistance.

Core idea: Oppression under colonial rule destroys not only physical freedom but also hope, identity, and the future of a nation.

- **Main themes**

- Colonialism and domination
- War and violence
- Oppression and control
- Death and destruction
- Loss of hope and identity
- Psychological fear and surveillance
- **Mood:** Gloomy and oppressive, creating a constant sense of fear, tension, and suffocation
- **Tone:** Mournful, intimate, foreboding, and politically charged

Remember

- **"Dark time"** not "dark forever": calling it a season implies it will pass; hope survives even in the poem's darkest lines
- **Brown beetles** = soldiers: numerous, armoured, invasive; **alliteration** of b-sounds creates a heavy treading rhythm
- **Sun is hidden, not dead: pathetic fallacy** that preserves hope; sun + red flowers + green grass = Guyanese flag colours
- **Red flowers** = blood + poppies allusion (WWI remembrance, but the British are villains here, not heroes)
- **"Festival of guns / carnival of misery"** = two **oxymorons**: what colonisers celebrate, the colonised must mourn
- **"Man of death"** may be personified Death itself, not just a soldier; **"strange invader"** = foreign AND alien/inhuman
- **"Aiming at your dream"** = the thesis: oppression kills psychological freedom, not just physical life
- **Free verse** = urgency: no time for formal pattern; the situation demands raw, unfiltered voice