James I of Scotland, Birdsong, from the Kings Quair

This is a short extract from a much longer poem, which sets out with this section on birdsong . This poem goes way back to early poetic traditions, as it calls on the world to awaken to love in the spring, to follow the example of the birds – a valentine theme and almost a cliche in early poetry.. It is romantically medieval and pageant-like. It is at the same time dignified and over the top. With its historical impact it would suit a rather formal event, and it has an opening impact for the start of a ceremony.

"Worschippe, ye that loveris bene, this May,
For of your blisse the kalendis ar begonne,
And sing with us, 'Away, winter, away!
Cum, somer, cum, the suete sesoun and sonne!'
Awake, for schame! that have your hevynnis wonne
And amorously lift up your hedis all:
Thank Lufe that list you to his merci call."

Quhen thai this song had song a lytill thrawe,
Thai stent a quhile and therwith unaffraid,
As I beheld and kest myn eyne a lawe,
From beugh to beugh thay hippit and thai plaid,
And freschly in thair birdis kynd arraid
Thair fetheris new, and fret thame in the sonne,
And thankit Lufe that had thair makis wonne.

James I of Scotland

Robert Burns, A Red, Red Rose

Possibly the best known love poem, or love song, in the world, and a classic choice. You are lucky if you have someone to sing it, but it will also stand being read as a poem. If you do read it you will need to practice, for you will not get away with mistakes, it is so well known. The red, red rose would have been a red wild rose, while the references to geology, “till aa the seas gang dry,” “and the rocks melt wi the sun,” reflect the newest scientific knowledge of Burns' day.

O my Luve's like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June;
O my Luve's like the melodie
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
So deep in luve am I:
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry:

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun:
I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee well, my only Luve
And fare thee well, a while!
And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' it were ten thousand mile.

Robert Burns

Joanna Baillie, from Fi, let us a' to the wedding

This narrative of a big local celebration would suit a wedding with a larger number of guests,who will enjoy anticipating the dancing and fiddling, not to mention the mouthwatering details of comestibles. The last two lines of the poem may be altered to include the names of the couple, as in “John's to be married to Jenny,” or whatever, replacing “gowden hair” with “jet-back hair” or “nut-brown hair” as required.

Fi, let us a' to the wedding
for they will be lilting there,
frae mony a distant ha'ding,
the fun and the feasting to share,
for they will get sheeps-heid and haggis,
and browst o the barley-mow,
E'en he that comes latest and lag is
may feast upon dainties enow.

Veal florentines, in the o'en baken,
weel plenished wi raisins and fat.
Beef, mutton and chuckies, a' taken
hot reekin frae spit and frae pat.
And glasses (I trow tis nae said ill)
to drink the young couple's gude luck.
Weel filled wi a braw beechen ladle
frae punchbowl as big as Dumbuck.

And then will come dancing and daffing,
and reelin and crossin o hands,
– even auld Lucky is laughing,
as back by the aumry she stan's.
Sic bobbing, and flinging, and whirling,
While fiddlers are making their din,
And pipers are droning and skirling,
as loud as the roar o the linn.

Then fy, let us a' to the wedding,
For they will be lilting there,
For Jock's to be married to Maggie,
the lass wi the gowden hair.

Joanna Baillie

Susanna Blamire, O Donald ye are Just the Man

This narrative is wryly humorous and has a moral too, so if you like sermons this rather plain spoken home spun philosophy might appeal. Again you could adapt the first line to the name of the bridegroom. Susanna Blamire was from Carlisle, but spent many years in Scotland; she is usually regarded as a Carlisle poet who wrote in Scots. If you live in the south west and want something local, this might suit.

O Donald! ye are just the man
Who, when he's got a wife,
Begins to fratch--nae notice ta'en--
They're strangers a' their life.

The fan may drop--she takes it up,
The husband keeps his chair;
She hands the kettle--gives his cup--
Without e'en--``Thank ye, dear.''

Now, truly, these slights are but toys;
But frae neglects like these,
The wife may soon a slattern grow,
And strive nae mair to please.

For wooers ay do all they can
To trifle wi' the mind;
They hold the blaze of beauty up,
And keep the poor things blind.

But wedlock tears away the veil,
The goddess is nae mair;
He thinks his wife a silly thing,
She thinks her man a bear.

Let then the lover be the friend--
The loving friend for life;
Think but thysel the happiest spouse,
She'll be the happiest wife.

Susanna Blamire

Alexander Gray, Persuasion

At some weddings you might want a slightly longer poem, and this one in the narrative tradition is a sensitive story of courtship. It's comical, and should be read to emphasise this comedy, while at the same time touching, as the couple agree to leave the work and go out in the moonlight.

Haste ye to the window, Jean,
For a lanely man am I.
Let me see your bonny een
Keekin' oot as I go by.
No ilka chield wad come sae far
To hear your mither's host's nae waur.

'Tammas, I've a heap to dae;
Bread to bake and claes to mend.
Gin I hark to a' you say,
Gude kens when the wark 'ill end;
But since you're there, I micht as weel
Be ceevil to a neebour chiel'.'

Jeannie lass, come doon the stair;
I canna crack unless you're near.
There's lots a body disna care
To tell a lass, when fowk may hear.
I wat you mak an unco phraise
0' bakin' bread and mendin' claes.

'Tammas, you've nae mense ava;
You're but an orra wanderin' loon.
You think that when you gi'e a ca',
I'll leave my work and hurry doon.
I ken you've nocht to say to me;
But, still an' on, I'll come and see.'

Jeannie, let's gae up the hill;
We'll see the mune rise by and by.
It's fine at nicht, when a' thing's still,
To hear the corncraiks in the rye.
Lassie, think o' a' you miss,
Indoors in sic a nicht as this.

'Tammas, wha' can eat brent bread?
You ken yoursel' it's far frae richt;
But losh be here, it is indeed
A maist by ordinar' bonny nicht.
'Forbye; it's no that michty late;
You're no far wrang; the wark can wait.'

Alexander Gray

R L Stevenson, When aince Aprile has fairly come

Stevenson was a great wordsmith in both English and Scots. Because he used both languages so fluently he would normally pick his language to suit his theme, and in this poem he uses Scots to be slightly sentimental about the past, picking both a theme and a metre that are retrospective: the idea, seen in James I's work, of Spring and Valentine, the season when the birds mate, being the time for love in both the human and animal world. The speaker admits that the time has come for commitment. The “ram-stam harum-scarum raw” is one of Stevenson's more extravagant descriptions, and makes the courting sound a little out of hand, but his smiling face tells us the suitor is happy with his choice. A nice poem for a young couple's wedding.

When aince Aprile has fairly come,
An' birds may bigg in winter's lum,
An' pleisure's spreid for a' and some
  O' whatna state,
Love, wi' her auld recruitin' drum,
  Than taks the gate.

The heart plays dunt wi' main an' micht;
The lasses' een are a' sae bricht,
Their dresses are sae braw an' ticht,
  The bonny birdies!-
Puir winter virtue at the sicht
  Gangs heels ower hurdies.

An' aye as love frae land to land
Tirls the drum wi' eident hand,
A' men collect at her command,
  Toun-bred or land'art,
An' follow in a denty band
  Her gaucy standart.

An' I, wha sang o' rain an' snaw,
An' weary winter weel awa',
Noo busk me in a jacket braw,
  An' tak my place
I' the ram-stam, harum-scarum raw,
  Wi' smilin' face.

R L Stevenson

T A Robertson ('Vagaland'),Tuslag *coltsfoot*

It's surprising how many people have connections with Shetland, and this Shetland dialect piece brings a parable of the coltsfoot into the life that will come back after the hardest winter. The couple will work together to bring a million flowers into their lives; they will work their hardest to achieve this and rely on the good weather of fortune for the rest. A fresh and unusual poem for a celebration, perhaps most suitable for people who have already put problems and sorrows behind them. This poet wrote under a pseudonym in the Shetland papers and is not very well known, but it is a cracking poem all the same.

Wi da lentenin days ida first o da Voar
Da Mairch wind comes agyin ta da door
At da black frost stekkit wi bolts an bars,
An reesles him open upo da harrs.

We wait, whin da door is open wide,
Fir life ta come ta da world ootside.
Ee day, wi a glod atween da shooers,
We see da first o da tuslag flooers.

Whaar last year's girse lies bleached an dowed
Dey sheen laek a nevfoo o yallow gowd,
Whin we see dem apo da eart we kyin
At da |Voar is here wi his arles agyin.

Dey're a sign ta men at da Voar can gie
Plenty ta dem at'll earn der fee
Be da toil o der haands an da sweat o der broo,
Wi kishie, an spade, an harrow, an ploo.

Whin dey're kyeerried an borrowed an spread an sholled
An delled da leys an harrowed da mold,
Dey can say at last, 'We're done wir best;
Send god waddar to do da rest.

Dey'll be mael an tatties, an maet fir kye,
Ta pay fir wir wark, an we'll get firbye,
As da year gengs on wi da sun an shooers,
Da colour an scent o a million flooers.

'Vagaland'

George Campbell Hay, Wha Saw us Kissan? from the modern Greek

George Cambell Hay is best know for his writing in Gaelic but he was a fine linguist. He spent part of the war in Greece where he learnt Greek, met revolutionaries and was shellshocked by an explosion in a cafe. His Gaelic poems have been republished recently. It is less well known that he wrote in Scots too, and this poem, a translation, is upbeat and romantic. It has a wry and universal humour in its treatment of fast spreading gossip in a small community, and is suitable for a couple who want to emphasise their happy physical love. The Greek fishing village will resonate anywhere in coastal Scotland, while the moon and stars give it a serious and universal quality that is perfect for a wedding poem. It is a great wee poem with a fabulous music.

Wha saw us kissan? It was nicht.
  Wha saw ye in ma airms?
Nicht saw us, an the palean day,
  the mune an aa the sterns.

The mune an sterns gaed wheelan roon;
  watchan yersel an me,
an syne, tie westward dwinan doon,
  clyped on us tae the sea.

Syne the sea tellt it tae the oar,
  whilk glintan in the faem,
tellt yon lad wha, back ashore
  sings o't fornenst ma hame.

George Campbell Hay

Sydney Goodsir Smith, Ye Speir Me

This is a short, controlled poem with a rather different approach to passionate love. What is happening to them? What is the roaring sound? The idea is a conceit, the lava thundering out from their bursting hearts, but it is totally original and the sort of poem that you either love or hate. It also reminds me slightly of some of MacDiarmid's short lyrics, which it was probably meant to emulate. If you love this poem you might want to use it. Despite its controlled structure it is an intimate poem. I imagine it at a rather quiet wedding

Ye speir me, luve, a question,
As we spin through the abyss
Whar is nae stern or compass,
Ye speir me what it is
That in the nicht o passion
And the langorie o dawin
Rairs in the tideless ocean
Whar we byde as in a dwaum...?
It is the lava thunderan out
Frae the burst craters o the hairt.

Sydney Goodsir Smith

Helen B Cruickshank, Sea Buckthorn

The title poem of Helen B Cruickshank's best known collection. It is a carefully written poem in its rhymes and rhythm and has an autumnal theme with the orange buckthorn berries. There is a quiet confidence in its statements in the last stanza where the argument is spelt out, while everyone who has seen sea buckthorn berries will get the connection with the last two lines, “hoo the luntin lowe o beauty lichts the grey o life” This would be a quiet and thoughtful rather than an exuberant choice, and would suit some people all the more for that. Would also suit an autumn wedding.

Saut an cruel winds taeshear it,
  Nichts o haar an rain---
Ye micht think the sallow buckthorn
  Neer a hairst could hain;
But amang the sea-bleached branches
  Ashen-grey as pain,
Thornset orange berries cluster,
  Flamin, beauty-fain.

Daith an dule will stab ye surely,
  Be ye man or wife,
Mony trauchles an mischances
  In ilk weird are rife;
Bide the storm ye canna hinder,
  Mindin through the strife,
Hoo the luntin lowe o beauty
  Lichts the grey o life

Helen B Cruickshank

Rab Wilson, from The Rubaiyat

A book of verse, a jug of wine, and thou – how does it go? well here it is in the Scots version, provided by the redoubtable Rab Wilson. One of the great love poems of the world, and centuries old too. Rab Wilson interprets Fitzgerald interpreting Omar Khayyam, as the old text plays on the enjoyment of life and discourse with a companion, untroubled by the vagaries of fortune. A good statement of a philosophy that will carry a couple through, and expressed in disarmingly practical terms. For a wedding with a breath of fresh air to it.

Ach, gie me a bottle o wine, a guid book o poems
An fowr slice oan cheese. Then you an me,
Sittin oan the park bench –
We widna caa the king wir uncle.

To be, or not to be – ye ken whit ah mean?
Aa thae manic highs and deidly depressive lows:
Yer heid fu o a that knowledge
An ye're embarrassed tae be seen drawing a sober braith?

Fir aa you ken, we don't really exist,
This hail Universe micht no exist.
We micht as weel relax and mak the maist o it;
Here the day and gone the morn

Rab Wilson

Sheena Blackhall, A Waddin Toast

Written especially as a wedding poem and it shows. This one will please all the relatives in the wedding party. Its good wishes and wisdom are dignified and soothing, and the structure we can expect from Sheena Blackhall's poems never lets us down for an instant. Sheena Blackhall says she began this poem by looking up the birds that mate for life. Following on from that theme, the idea of “halving life's lang tcyaave” is highly original and a strong argument for setting out on life with a partner. A lasting marriage is certainly something that relatives wish for a couple, and this optimistic toast or blessing will appeal to many.

Be as the swans that glimmer ower the loch
Waddit for life, until Daith dis them pairt
Be as the Cushie Doos, that coort foraye
Their dearies, wi a douce an tender-hairt

Be as the Ernes, sae fierce, an yet sae leal
Far reengin, yet wi a returnin wing
Be as the Hoolets, bosied in the laft
Inbye their nest, fur comfort see them cling

As burnie seeks the sea, an trees seek the air
The merriege o a man an wife should be
As blythe as blossom in the aspen’s hair
As merry as the rowan on the lea

It merks the stert o halvin life’s lang tcyaave
Fin twa lie doon tae taste life’s sweets thegither
Sae let the bells ring oot, the whisky poor
Let aa gweed wishes bless this pair foriver

Sheena Blackhall