



Art in Isolation - a new page for strange times

Part 1: Poetry

Members were asked to select a short poem (or a section of a longer poem) that they would like to share with other members of the society and to add a very brief indication why the poem has meaning for them.

Many thanks to those of you who submitted poems that you would like to share with other members. You will find them below with the comments you added.

Only Helen Ross (or perhaps Peter on her behalf!) was brave enough to send a poem of her own so she has earned first place. The others are listed in no special order.

I hope that many of you will enjoy reading the poems and thinking about them and perhaps reading more by these and other poets. Some of those of you who kept your powder dry may enjoy the selection and perhaps be encouraged to send a contribution and some of you who submitted poems may now be wishing to share dozens more! To date among the moderns we have no Betjeman, no Larkin, no Auden, no Eliot.....

This exercise has certainly kept me amused in isolation. I have been introduced to poems and poets new to me and I have been reminded of neglected favourites. I have been sent to my modest poetry collection (what a pleasure it is in isolation to have sorted out some of our books) and I have resorted to the extraordinary resources of the internet.

I found some particularly intriguing facts and connections. One of these was that Mary Oliver spent seven years working on the papers of Edna St Vincent Millay, each of them the most popular American poet of their generation and both represented here.

I hope that some of you may be stimulated to send me comments about these poems, about other poems that now come to your mind, about isolation, about cabbages and kings or any other thing you might like to share...

With warm regards

Nick

The Poems

*Bedded in
Gates closed
Silent – night
Plants bedded in soft earth
Alone – solitary
Listen the wind's soft song
Waiting
Dawn – sun
Gates open
A new day
The day begins
Watch*

Helen Ross

Helen wrote this poem when 'mightily frustrated by the closure of all the local garden centres and nurseries' reports Peter. Many of us will share her feeling.

"The Highwayman" by Alfred Notes

*The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor
And the Highwayman came riding – riding -- riding --
The Highwayman came riding up to the old inn door.*

This is one of my favourite poems, it is so full of rhythm and drama. In all there are 17 stanzas. In my teens I had an older cultured lady as a friend and she introduced me to many poems; she could recite the whole of this poem by

heart. I'd love to share this with others and hope they too find it passionate and with a spine-chilling ending!

Dorothy Ward

*I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not, how shall
I correct it?*

*Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?*

*Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.*

*Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?*

*Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing,
And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.*

This is by Mary Oliver, an American poet. She died last year. I was given her booklet by a friend for my 80th birthday and I value it a lot.

Rosemarie Hill

*Mindful
Every day
I see or I hear
something
that more or less
kills me
with delight,
that leaves me*

*like a needle
in the haystack
of light.
It is what I was born for –
to look, to listen,
to lose myself
inside this soft world –
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant –
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these –
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?*

Mary Oliver

Mary Oliver 1935-2019 (a late discovery for me) was an American, described in 2007 by the New York Times as "far and away this country's best-selling poet." Taking her inspiration from the natural world, she has an ability through her words to bring peace and quietude, reminding one always to turn one's attention to the world beyond our troubled thoughts. My choice of Mary Oliver is twofold: she has been a great solace to me following the death of my partner, another lover of the natural world, but the choice of this particular

poem seemed so apt for our present lockdown -- although our horizons are diminished, nevertheless there is still joy to be found.

Jane Cursiter

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.*

This is Shakespeare's Sonnet 116. It speaks to the spirit of perseverance, which we are all going to need at this difficult time. It is special to me because it was my late mother's favourite sonnet and she often recited it as a childhood lullaby.

Frank Benfield

*The room was suddenly rich and the great bay-window was
Spawning snow and pink roses against it
Soundlessly collateral and incompatible:
World is suddener than we fancy it.*

*World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.*

*And the fire flames with a bubbling sound for world
Is more spiteful and gay than one supposes—*

*On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one's hands—
There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.*

Louis Macniece

I buy old books from time to time, this one (Collected Poems, 1925 –1948) from a dusty old converted Victorian schoolhouse in a Suffolk village a few miles inland from Southwold. I bought it partly because I love the old Faber editions with the gorgeous typographic covers in Albertus by Berthold Wolpe – after 70 years still elegantly strong and communicative. What I love about this poem is the combination of fierce abstraction ('soundlessly collateral') with embodiment and tactility ('spit the pips'). The very best kinds of writing sometimes play a game of self-reflexivity; here the medium (the writing, the poem) 'bodies forth' (as G. M. Hopkins says) and yet transcends itself both as the glass and the limitations of perception. As a publisher and designer for over 40 years I love the self-awareness here.

David Williams

'Hope' by Emily Dickinson

*"Hope" is the thing with feathers
That perches on the soul.
And sings the tune without the words
And never stops -- at all.
And sweetest -- in the gale -- is heard --
And sore must be the storm --
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm.
I've heard it in the chilliest land
And on the strangest Sea
Yet never -- in Extremity
It asked a crumb -- of me.*

I am very fond of Emily Dickinson's poetry. It seems simple but has depths. 'I'm Nobody' is my favourite but 'Hope' seemed to fit the present. I have seen her garden in New England but sadly her house was closed when we visited.

Enid Turner

Age-old Thoughts

*The happiness of being small
Some children do not feel at all.
They'd very much prefer, you know,
Sixteen, or seventeen or so.*

*At eighteen thinks the youth, "Hang on!
Twenty will soon be gone"
And thirty's hardly ushered in
When forty looms with toothless grin.*

*And after forty - what a turn -
At fifty you're too old to learn,
While after fifty, it's a cinch,
Sixty is coming inch by inch.*

*Sixty itself is quite all right;
It's only seventy that's a fright.
At seventy you refuse to plod:
"I'll get to eighty yet, please God"*

*When eighty finds you in good heart
You make for ninety like a dart.
Once there you tot up with a thrill
The veterans who are older still.*

This is a poem translated by Ron Grey from the German of Otto A Friedrich. I read it at the Peacocks Christmas Lunch 2019 dedicating it to our eldest resident - aged 99!

Chris Everitt

The Windhover by Gerard Manley Hopkins

*I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding*

*Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

*Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!*

*No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.*

I have always loved Gerard Manley Hopkins's Windhover. I love the poetry but I also admire the kestrel. It is a bird that I often used to see hovering over the fields where I took Ben for his morning walk. Hopefully, this madness will end sometime and we can get together again.

John Harrison

*Oh, to be in England
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England - now!!
And after April, when May follows,
And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!
Hark, where my blossomed pear-tree in the hedge
Leans to the field and scatters on the clover
Blossoms and dewdrops - at the bent spray's edge -
That's the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over,
Lest you should think he never could recapture
The first fine careless rapture!
And though the fields look rough with hoary dew,
All will be gay when noontide wakes anew
The buttercups, the little children's dower-
Far brighter than this gaudy melon-flower!*

Robert Browning

At this time of year and in this extraordinary state of isolation this poem resonates in my mind every morning as I venture out into the park. Little elm trees are in tiny leaf and I wait for one of them to learn to resist their own dread disease. Our resident thrush always repeats his songs for me. There is hope for a better world.

Jo Barnes

*You may give them your love, but not your thought.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies, but not their souls.
For their souls dwell in the house of to-morrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite and He bends you with His might that his arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even He loves the arrow that flies so he loves also the bow that is stable.*

Khalil Giban

We are bombarded with advice from government, family and friends and at the same time we worry about our children, grandchildren and extended family and friends. Equally we give them advice/instructions to the best of our knowledge and experience.

A few years ago, after the death of my sister in law, I found this poem in her private belongings. In her professional life she was the very well regarded head of a department in a London private school followed by over 20 years as a successful headmistress. Not having any children herself it appears she used the message in this poem as a guideline for her pupils' respect and results. The e-mails and letters after her death bore this out. She died at the age of 83 and pupils from her early teaching years came to her funeral and spoke very fondly and respectfully of her.

Gisela Hayworth

"Upon Westminster Bridge"

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the morning air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour valley, rock or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

William Wordsworth

The 250th anniversary of William Wordsworth's birth fell very recently on April 7th. (This is also Judy's birthday, as it happens!) It seemed to us to resonate with our current situation, our country in lockdown and our cities so very much quieter with far less traffic, few planes overhead, parliament in recess and our "Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples" in the form of museums, art galleries, places of entertainment and places of worship indeed are silent and bare, devoid of visitors, and streets without the usual bustle of tourists and sightseers, and people going to and from work.

Keith and Judy Nightingale

*When as the rye reach to the chin,
And chopcherry, chopcherry ripe within,
Strawberries swimming in the cream,
And schoolboys playing in the stream;
Then Oh, then Oh, then Oh, my true-love said,
Till that time come again
She could not live a maid.*

George Peele 1558-1597

George Peele made a name as a writer at Oxford and then joined those swaggering Elizabethan actor/dramatists in London. This fresh, charming song comes from his half-forgotten play 'Old Wives' Tale'. A few well-chosen word pictures convey the rich life of the English summer; the cherries are ripe and sweet right through to the stone; there is a bowl of cream with strawberries floating in it; the long, light days are full of the sounds of children at play. And then there's love, so important when the expectation of life was only 25. The poem sets summer light and happiness against the dark of winter and premature death.

Christopher Martin

Eden Rock *by Charles Causley*

*They are waiting for me somewhere beyond Eden Rock,
My father, twenty-five, in the same suit
Of Genuine Irish Tweed, his terrier Jack
Still two years old and trembling at his feet.*

*My mother, twenty-three, in a sprigged dress
Drawn at the waist, ribbon in her straw hat,
Has spread the stiff white cloth over the grass,
Her hair, the colour of wheat, takes on the light..*

*She pours tea from a Thermos, the milk straight
From an old HP sauce bottle, a screw
Of paper for a cork, slowly sets out
The same three plates, the tin cups painted blue.*

*The sky whitens as if lit by three suns.
My mother shades her eyes and looks my way
Over the drifted stream.
My father spins a stone along the water. Leisurely,*

*They beckon to me from the other bank.
I hear them call "See where the stream-path is!
Crossing is not as hard as you might think"
I had not thought that it would be like this.*

I came across this poem about 10 years ago, when looking through a book to select poems suitable for reading aloud at the Group I facilitate for people with memory and cognitive difficulties.

It resonated with me straight away, painting a vivid, visual scene in my mind's eye. It certainly brought back many memories when I brought it to the Group, and it has become a favourite.

There is something very lyrical and gentle and comforting about this poem, especially when read aloud. I guess it reflects a hope that a lot of us hold about the final crossing of the stream.

Gloria Reed

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.*

*Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy Springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.*

*And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty Springs are little room,
About the woodland I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

This poem by A E Housman is appropriate for this time of year with so much blossom of the cherry and other prunus trees all around us. It is also timely as a reminder to make the most of life with a realisation that our span is limited. Housman wrote very little poetry but his "Shropshire Lad" series is wonderfully evocative of the English countryside and man's place within it. This poem has been set to music beautifully by George Butterworth.

Chris Flower

*Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
Nor yet a floating spar for men that sink
And rise and sink and rise and sink again.
Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
It may well be that in a difficult hour
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It may well be. I do not think I would.*

This sonnet is by Edna St Vincent Millay, an American poet who lived from 1892 to 1950. She was famous in her lifetime; her reputation then faded but is riding high again now. I find her deceptively simple verses very moving. Cheekily substituting the word 'day' for 'night' (apologies Edna, but secretly I think it's an improvement!) I read this poem at the wedding of one of our daughters.

Nick Barnes

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