

The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum

Poetry Roundabout

February 2021

Edited by John Coutts, Poet in Residence

BANISH BOREDOM - IN- LOCKDOWN EDITION



With inspiring Valentine's Day supplement!



Sent to your inbox, online at The Smith
and via ZOOM on Friday March 5th at 7.p.m.
email johnjcoutts@gmail.com for the link



Nothing to do but work,
Nothing to eat but food,
Nothing to wear but clothes
To keep one from going nude.
Nothing to breathe but air
Quick as a flash 't is gone;
Nowhere to fall but off,
Nowhere to stand but on.
Nothing to comb but hair,
Nowhere to sleep but in bed,
Nothing to weep but tears,
Nothing to bury but dead.
Nothing to sing but songs,
Ah, well, alas! alack!
Nowhere to go but out,
Nowhere to come but back.
Nothing to see but sights,
Nothing to quench but thirst,
Nothing to have but what we've got;
Thus thro' life we are cursed.
Nothing to strike but a gait;
Everything moves that goes.
Nothing at all but common sense
Can ever withstand these woes.

Benjamin Franklin King (1857 - 1894)

Colin Gregory read this to us at the last ZOOM meeting. It was also published as Lesley Duncan's 'Poem of the Day' in 'The Herald' on February 10th

The Confirmation by Edwin Muir

Yes, yours, my love, is the right human face.
I in my mind had waited for this long,
Seeing the false and searching for the true,
Then found you as a traveller finds a place
Of welcome suddenly amid the wrong
Valleys and rocks and twisting roads. But you,
What shall I call you? A fountain in a waste,
A well of water in a country dry,
Or anything that's honest and good, an eye
That makes the whole world bright. Your open heart,
Simple with giving, gives the primal deed,
The first good world, the blossom, the blowing seed,
The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea,
Not beautiful or rare in every part,
But like yourself, as they were meant to be.

John Coutts wrote

A VALENTINE

While undergoing radiotherapy at the Beatson Clinic in Glasgow.

The rays I cannot
Sense or see
Run through and through
Recumbent me.

I feel the buzz
I hear the hum
*"Our Father
May your kingdom come"*

The gantry stirs
And moves. *"Your will
Be done."* ... hum...buzz...
...While I lie still

And think how we
Played kiss and vow...
Who could foretell
The distant now?

The gantry stops.
The spell is cast.
This I declare:
The future, past

*And present joys
We both possess
Outrun the rays
That burn and bless.*

Will Shakespeare of Stratford on Avon *wishes to point out the downside of Valentine's Day with words sung by Ophelia in his popular play 'Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.'*

'Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window,
To be your Valentine.'

*Then up he rose, and donned his clothes,
And dupp'd the chamber door.
Let in the maid that out a maid
Never departed more.*

'By Gis and by Saint Charity,
Alack, and fie, for shame!
Young men will do 't, if they come to 't.
By Cock, they are to blame.'

*Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed.'
'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
An thou hadst not come to my bed.'*

Colin Gregory writes: *I'd like to contribute 'What the Bird Said Early in the Year', by CS Lewis.*

Addison's Walk is a path surrounding an island in the River Cherwell, glorious with fritillaries in spring, in the grounds of Magdalen College, Oxford. It's named after the poet and politician Joseph Addison (1672-1719), who was a Fellow of Magdalen. Lewis was also a Fellow of Magdalen and used to enjoy the walk with his friends JRR Tolkien and Hugo Dyson. There is a plaque in his memory with a copy of the poem.

"I heard in Addison's Walk a bird sing clear:
This year the summer will come true. This year. This year.

Winds will not strip the blossom from the apple trees
This year, nor want of rain destroy the peas.

This year time's nature will no more defeat you,
Nor all the promised moments in their passing cheat you.

This time they will not lead you round and back
To Autumn, one year older, by the well-worn track.

This year, this year, as all these flowers foretell,
We shall escape the circle and undo the spell.

Often deceived, yet open once again your heart,
Quick, quick, quick, quick!—the gates are drawn apart."

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Jock Stein writes: *It's understandable that we have been feeling sorry for ourselves over this past year, but amidst the vaccine euphoria let's remember those whose plight has changed little since it made headlines a couple of years ago. At that time I wrote several poems about refugees, based on book 3 of the Old Testament Psalms. Here is one which picks up one enigmatic Hebrew word (no one knows what it means) used in Psalms 75, 76 and 77. It is based on a story in the Economist of 3rd November 2018, 'A Small Piece of Hell'.*

Selah

*'When the earth totters, with all its inhabitants,
it is I who keep its pillars steady. Selah.'*

Psalms 75:3

Zabiullah sips tea in a tent;
stench of sewage hangs around
him and seven thousand others,
waiting for news of asylum,
watching a rat scuttle past.
Selah.

"This is worse than the boat,"
he says, caught in an eternity
hung around his neck:
queueing for toilets, ten minutes,
queueing for bread, ten hours,
queueing for asylum, ten months.
Selah.

Lesbos, island of loitering,
loitering in tent and trauma,
loitering in mental breakdown,
loitering under the leaky umbrella
of that deal with Turkey,
put up fast to block
the heavy rain of refugees.
Selah.

"We are treated worse than animals,"
Somali teen Saida says,
fighting months of boredom,

fighting for a doctor,
struggling for identity
against the lure of suicide.
Selah.

God has set a time, *Selah*,
to judge with equity, *Selah*.
Selah – silent pause
which echoes all our questions,
leaves us none the wiser.
Selah.

Helen Maclaren writes: *I came across this recently, liked it and kept going back to it.*

At the Bomb Testing Site

by William Stafford

At noon in the desert a panting lizard
waited for history, its elbows tense,
watching the curve of a particular road
as if something might happen.

It was looking at something farther off
than people could see, an important scene
acted in stone for little selves
at the flute end of consequences.

There was just a continent without much on it
under a sky that never cared less.
Ready for a change, the elbows waited.
The hands gripped hard on the desert.

Anne Murray writes: *Not sure when this was written but it was published somewhere between 2005 and 2010. It is in a super collection of Alan's work "An Altitude Within" Kennedy & Boyd 2010*

Planetary Response

by Alan MacGillivray

("It is a paltry business to try to drag down the arduus furor of the stones to the futile imaginings of men . . .", from "On a Raised Beach", Hugh MacDiarmid)

I suppose I should be grateful
for your (recently discovered) concern
regarding my well-being, flattered indeed
by your wish to save me from catastrophe.

You loudly expressed wishes to protect
and preserve my tigers, my elephants,
my whales, my layers and my sheets,
my everything, it seems (except my rats and fleas)

have all been noted. Do I commend them?
Up to a point, my *homo sapiens*.
I have no memory of similar campaigns
on behalf of my trilobites, my dinosaurs,

my mammoths. Take my sea, for instance,
my shifting plates. It grows, it shrinks;
they come and go. I am still here.
The need for my salvation is not an issue.

Perhaps you misread our situations. I notice
how you change appearance with my seasons;
summer flimsies, floating fabrics; winter wools
and fleeces. So it is with me.

Anne *also recommends*

Winter

Winter.
My dour garden -
incommunicado,
except for the snowdrops – pushy
or what?

It's hard being a poet

lacing
phrases into
corseted forms,
squeezing unmelted flesh
between the lines, amputating
extra feet.

Gill McConnell

from ***Garden Party, winner of the Calum MacDonald Poetry Pamphlet Award 2004***

Mike Springate writes: *'Mair' is the term for 'Mother' both in Thai and Laotian. My first 'Mekong' poem was written during the 2016 Anglo-Thai Society expedition there.* [published in the last Roundabout: JC] *This is the second.*

MEKONG 2.

Mair*mighty Mekong! Mother of all the rivers
That seek the sea through Asia's Eastern plains.
Mair, river at your wideness flat and calm
Reflects dark tree-lines and a clouding sky.
But when the rocks break up, the river races
And chuckles as she storms through stony places:
Great gush of water, seething through black canyons –
Nature, assaulted, rises, will not cease.

We speed upriver in a long, unstable boat
That lurches side to side. We pass
A painted ship, blue as the sky,
With MCC writ on her stern
[from Vietnam, not Lords!].
Breeze and the spray upon my sunlit face
Remind me that returning to this place
Will be a constant thorn in my desire.
Its sand-banked shores, with long-tailed boats at rest,
Lining below the wood-framed houses in the trees.
Far distant hills, the purple 'Nipple' mount –
Or is it 'Lingam mountain' – face these shores,
Circle them in a hazy, warm embrace.

There must be fish, for fishermen abound,
Cast nets and recast, without apparent catch.
But birds are rare – one heron on a rock,
A solitary egret at the waterfall,
A scattering of cormorants, little else
Until the sudden passing of their migrant flight
Peppers the setting sun; then birds are done.

But, plastic dotted in the water, bottles, scraps
Of indestructible rubbish. The river low

[the Chinese dams add to the dry season so]:
A river defaced by plastic, floating, dead,
Sore places unattended on the soft skin of this world,
Suggesting that its people little care
That in their hands they hold a prize,
A priceless Treasure Garden called “Cambodge”.

Holden Hall *writes of another river.*

Tweed Colours

Blue sky;
White, grey and black clouds;
Pale green grass;
Yellow stubble;
Purple and white flowers;
Grey-green water,
Red-earthen riverbanks;
Brown tree trunks;
Cor coloured grasses;
Red and grey rooftiles;
White and red house walls;
Black white and brown cattle;
White dancing butterflies
Complete the idyllic scene.

David Dalziel writes: *This poem by John Gowans was written when he was about 14 and had recently moved from Cumberland to Blackheath in the industrial Midlands of England which in those days were very grimy indeed.*

What would I give
To be once more
Strolling alone
Along the shore?
To hear once more
The Seagull's scream
To wander by
A babbling stream?

What would I give
To hear the rills
And see the poet's
Daffodils?
To view once more
The scars and fells
To list to what
Lake water tells?

What would I give
To climb again
Upon the rough sides
Of the glen?
What would I give
Once more to stand
Upon the crags
Of Cumberland?

Gowans 4a

JC adds: *My friend the late John Gowans was General of The Salvation Army from 1999-2002, and also an excellent preacher poet and lyricist.*

LOCKDOWN IS ENDING

By Eugene Lubbock

[Written when Eugene's school in London was reopening, but not for him]

Lockdown is ending,
The R number's falling,
Yet I still feel
That life is a bore.
The days are all blending
The schoolwork's unending
My mood is appalling
The internet's stalling
Getting up in the morning
Is terribly boring.

A final word

Lockdown doth not a Prison make,
Nor flimsy masks a Cage;
Minds innocent and quiet take
That for an Hermitage.
If I have freedom in my Love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone that soar above,
Enjoy such Liberty.

With apologies to the Cavalier poet, Richard Lovelace, [1617-57]. whose original reads:

'Stone walls do not a prison make
Nor iron bars a cage...'