

The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum



The Poetry Roundabout

Spring Edition

March 2021

Edited by John Coutts, Poet in Residence



*'March, month of 'many weathers' wildly comes
In hail and snow and rain and threat'ning hums
And floods: while often at his cottage door
The shepherd stands to hear the distant roar
Loos'd from the rushing mills and river locks....
March bids farewell with garlands in her hair..'*

John Clare – 'The Shepherd's Calendar – March'. [See 'Postscript']

*Send your chosen poem – your own work or a favourite –
to johnjcoutts@gmail.com by Monday April 12th .*

*To join the Roundabout on ZOOM at 7.30 Friday on April 9th
email johnjcoutts@gmail.com and ask for the link.*

Jock Stein writes: *'Recently the bird poems of Irene Howat along with photos by Pat Lomax were published by Handsel Press as The Gladness of Birds. They hold copyright on this extract, chosen to greet Spring as it unfolds . . .'*



To a

There is nothing in your
plumage to mark
you out as special,

Your gold spectacles are
perhaps a clue to

Come spring your treasures flow
in golden arias
and songs of golden waters flowing,
of golden raindrops falling.

Surprised at yourself you trill with laughter that melts
into golden silence in the still spring air.

Through your spectacles
she doesn't look dowdy at all.

John Coutts *recommends* 'Spring' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring –
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

Mike Springate *has written*

A HINT OF SPRING

8 am

A frosted sky with flocks of scattered clouds
Like sheep upon a grazing field of blue;
The first glimpse of a hesitant sun
Nosing night's overcast and driving it away.
A brace of sparrows in the holly tree –
Two only, for they are a dying breed,
But many pigeon with contemplative 'coos',
Purged of their colour in the Winter dawn
Of scudding clouds and cutting wind.

9 am

What difference an hour brings – wind drops,
A trace of mare's tail in the sky;
Spring sunshine glowing on the grateful fields.
Lodged in the hedge a twittering of birds
Preparing for another year of nests and eggs.
The distant church bell chiming nine
Curtails my walk and sends me home again.

Colin Gregory writes: *Since January and early February were so cold and the snowdrops in my garden are still in full bloom, I thought that Last Week of February, 1890 by **Robert Bridges** would be appropriate*

Hark to the merry birds, hark how they sing!
Although 'tis not yet spring
And keen the air!
Hale Winter, half resigning ere he go,
Doth to his heiress shew
His kingdom fair.

Colin also recommends Bridges' '*First Spring Morning: A Child's Poem*'. **because it captures not only the renewal we are all looking forward to but also innocence and joy:'**

Look! look! The spring is come:
O feel the gentle air,
That wanders thro' the boughs to burst
The thick buds everywhere!
The birds are glad to see
The high unclouded sun:
Winter is fled away, they sing,
The gay time is begun.
Adown the meadows green
Let us go dance and play,
And look for violets in the lane,
And ramble far away
To gather primroses,
That in the woodland grow,
And hunt for oxlips, or if yet
The blades of bluebells show.
There the old woodman gruff
Hath half the coppice cut,
And weaves the hurdles all day long
Beside his willow hut.
We'll steal on him, and then
Startle him, all with glee
Singing our song of winter fled
And summer soon to be.

Helen Maclaren recommends '**Shroud**', by **George Mackay Brown**
and adds: *'I wish I could visit Orkney instead of just reading its poetry'*.

Seven threads make the shroud,
The white thread,
A green corn thread,
A blue fish thread,
A red stitch, rut and rieving and wrath,
A gray thread
(All winter failing hand falleth on wheel)
The black thread,
And a thread too bright for the eye.

Anne Clarke recommends

Emily Dickinson's 'Hope is the thing with feathers', 'which seems appropriate at this time when hope is dawning again. This version uses Emily's original, highly idiosyncratic punctuation.'

'Hope is the thing with feathers -
That perches in 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.

Here is the full text of

Planetary Response by Alan MacGillivray, only half of which was included in our last edition

("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.
My lofty parent-patron who holds me
in his grip (the sun to you)
dictates what I shall wear – a suit of water,
hat of ice, coat of air and cloud, shirts
of grass and forest. I shift and change them

as required by flares and wind and solar messages.
Thus you too, my parasite populations,
water-dependent organisms,
have your good and bad days.
To me, cela ne fait rien.
The me that you ignore – that rock
and magma, iron core, the one essential Stone -
is unperturbed. Scratch and bore like mites,
gnaw and consume, make holes like moths,
ruffle my garments, then, in a panic
at the unaccustomed draught, preach
your sermons of salvation.
Forgive me if I stay unimpressed.
I shall merely adjust my dress,
O my bacteria, my Ephemeridae.

Heather Carroll recommends

Ride the Turtle's Back by Beth Brant

A woman grows hard and skinny.
She squeezes into small corners.
Her quick eyes uncover dust and cobwebs.
She reaches out
for flint and sparks fly in the air.
Flames turned loose on fields
burn down to bare seeds
we planted deep.

The corn is white and sweet.
Under is pale, perfect kernels.
a rotting cob is betrayal
it lies in our bloated stomachs.

I lie in Grandmother's bed
and dream the earth into a turtle.
She carries us slowly across the universe.
The sun warms us.
At night, the stars do tricks.
The moon caresses us.

Beth E. Brant [1941-2015] was a poet from the Mohawk Nation in the USA and Canada. Heather describes her work as 'phenomenal.'

Jeff Kemp *has written* **Along The Corridor**

Danny,
she's shouting,
has been all morning.

Help me,
come and get me,
I want my breakfast.

Down the ward,
the doctor's voice
is heard as a murmur.

Danny
come on, where are you,
you big ...

The doctor now
outside my room with
life-and death words

I can make no sense of
then catch, "discharge today,"
just as the nurse turns aside

while entering my room
and calls,
"Danny's not here, yet,"

quietly adding to me,
"she visited him in this ward,
five years ago. Before he died."

Anne Murray recommends '**The Belfry**' by R.S. Thomas. She writes *'I love the lines . . . 'the heart in its bone belfry hangs and is dumb.' and find the sentiment of the second verse very reassuring at this time in what are difficult days for us all.*

I have seen it standing up grey,
Gaunt, as though no sunlight
Could ever thaw out the music
Of its great bell; terrible
In its own way, for religion
Is like that. There are times
When a black frost is upon
One's whole being, and the heart
In its bone belfry hangs and is dumb.

But who is to know? Always,
Even in winter in the cold
Of a stone church, on his knees
Someone is praying, whose prayers fall
Steadily through the hard spell
Of weather that is between God
and himself. Perhaps they are warm rain
That brings the sun and afterwards flowers
On the raw graves and throbbing of bells.

John Coutts writes: *'A recent ZOOM-based Morning Service at Queen Street Methodist Church, Stirling, prepared us for the forthcoming COP Conference in Glasgow. I was asked to contribute a sequence of short prayer poems on the theme of climate change.'*

Prayer Poems for a Changing World

Carteret Island off the coast of New Guinea could disappear completely. The rising sea eats away at the beach, and contaminates ground water as well.

The wells our fathers dug are salty now...
We put up plastic tanks to catch the rain
We islanders must change our ways- but how?
The sea still rises. Is it all in vain?

In Australia the recent bush fires were terrible. One firefighter was photographed helping a small koala bear,

Gasping for a drink, a small koala bear
Gulps from a plastic bottle and survives;
Escaping from the scorching fires that took
Too many animal - and human - lives.

Earlier this year, in the Himalayas, the warming climate caused a glacier to break up. Valleys in North India, already stripped of trees, were overwhelmed by the rushing waters.

The melting glacier broke. The waters came
Cascading down...and round...and through...to smash
Houses and dams and fields and human hopes,
Leaving a gaping gash.

In West Africa, grassland between the desert and the southern forests is drying out. Both farmers and herdsmen are struggling and sometimes competing with each other.

This land was green when I was very young.
The grass was rich. Our cattle wandered free'
Now all is dry and brown. One skinny goat
Chews at a stunted tree.

Susan Baquis writes: *This haiku transports me to a peaceful daydreamy space. I find it so calming.*

‘A Field of Cotton’ by Matsuo Bashō

a field of cotton —
as if the moon
had flowered

And finally – **Sam Ridley** would like ‘**SKIMBLESHANKS THE RAILWAY CAT**’ by T.S.Eliot ‘because it has places I have been through on the train.’ He adds ‘The poem sounds like trains on the lines.’

There's a whisper down the line at 11.39
When the Night Mail's ready to depart,
Saying "Skimble where is Skimble
has he gone to hunt the thimble?
We must find him or the train can't start."
All the guards and all the porters
and the stationmaster's daughters
They are searching high and low,
Saying "Skimble where is Skimble
for unless he's very nimble
Then the Night Mail just can't go."
At 11.42 then the signal's nearly due
And the passengers are frantic to a man--
Then Skimble will appear and he'll saunter to the rear:
He's been busy in the luggage van!
He gives one flash of his glass-green eyes
And the signal goes "All Clear!"
And we're off at last for the northern part
Of the Northern Hemisphere!
You may say that by and large
it is Skimble who's in charge
Of the Sleeping Car Express.
From the driver and the guards
to the bagmen playing cards
He will supervise them all, more or less.
Down the corridor he paces
and examines all the faces
Of the travellers in the First and the Third;
He establishes control by a regular patrol
And he'd know at once if anything occurred.
He will watch you without winking
and he sees what you are thinking
And it's certain that he doesn't approve
Of hilarity and riot, so the folk are very quiet

When Skimble is about and on the move.
You can play no pranks with Skimbleshanks!
He's a Cat that cannot be ignored;
So nothing goes wrong on the Northern Mail
When Skimbleshanks is aboard.

Oh, it's very pleasant when
you have found your little den
With your name written up on the door.
And the berth is very neat
with a newly folded sheet
And there's not a speck of dust on the floor.
There is every sort of light-
you can make it dark or bright;
There's a handle that you turn to make a breeze.
There's a funny little basin
you're supposed to wash your face in
And a crank to shut the window if you sneeze.
Then the guard looks in politely
and will ask you very brightly
"Do you like your morning tea weak or strong?"
But Skimble's just behind him
and was ready to remind him,
For Skimble won't let anything go wrong.
And when you creep into your cosy berth
And pull up the counterpane,
You ought to reflect that it's very nice
To know that you won't be bothered by mice--
You can leave all that to the Railway Cat,
The Cat of the Railway Train!

In the watches of the night
he is always fresh and bright;
Every now and then he has a cup of tea
With perhaps a drop of Scotch
while he's keeping on the watch,
Only stopping here and there to catch a flea.
You were fast asleep at Crewe
and so you never knew
That he was walking up and down the station;

You were sleeping all the while
he was busy at Carlisle,
Where he greets the stationmaster with elation.
But you saw him at Dumfries,
where he speaks to the police
If there's anything they ought to know about:
When you get to Gallowgate
there you do not have to wait--
For Skimbleshanks will help you to get out!
He gives you a wave of his long brown tail
Which says: "I'll see you again!
You'll meet without fail on the Midnight Mail
The Cat of the Railway Train.

POSTSCRIPT: John Coutts adds: This is the twelfth edition of the Poetry Roundabout online. Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to a varied and interesting collection – with the suggested theme of 'Spring'. Finding new treasures is one of the pleasures of editing the Roundabout – and while hunting for poems about the month of March I discovered 'The Shepherd's Calendar' by John Clare. 'March, month of many weathers' is a good description of the present season. I've added some extracts from Clare's long poem, in what seems to be his own spelling. He was a true countryman and a keen observer of birds.'

'March month of 'many weathers' wildly comes
In hail and snow and rain and threatning hums
And floods: while often at his cottage door
The shepherd stands to hear the distant roar
Loosid from the rushing mills and river locks
Wi thundering sound and over powering shocks
And headlong hurry thro the meadow brigs
Brushing the leaning sallows fingering twigs
In feathery foam and eddy hissing chase
Rolling a storm o'ertaken travellers pace
From bank to bank along the meadow leas
Spreading and shining like to little seas.
While in the pale sunlight a watery brood
Of swooping white birds flock about the flood.
Yet winter seems half weary of its toil

And round the ploughman on the melting soil
Will thread a minute's sunshine wild and warm
Thro' the ragg'd places of the swimming storm
And oft the shepherd in his path will spy
The little daisy in the wet grass lye,
That to the peeping sun enlivens gay
Like Labour smiling on an holiday.....

...The hedger toils oft scaring rustling doves
From out the hedgrows who in hunger browse
The chockolate berrys on the ivy boughs
And flocking field fares speckld like the thrush
Picking the red haw from the sweeing bush
That come and go on winters chilling wing
And seem to share no sympathy wi spring...

...While close behind 'em struts the nauntling crow
And daws whose heads seem powderd oer wi snow
To seek the worms-and rooks a noisey guest
That on the wind rockd elms prepares her nest
On the fresh furrow often drops to pull
The twitching roots and gathering sticks and wool
Neath trees whose dead twigs litter to the wind
And gaps where stray sheep left their coats behind
While ground larks on a sweeing clump of rushes
Or on the top twigs of the oddling bushes
Chirp their 'cree creeing' note that sounds of spring
And sky larks meet the sun wi flittering wing
Soon as the morning opes its brightning eye
Large clouds of sturnels blacken thro the sky
From oizer holts about the rushy fen
And reedshaw borders by the river Nen
And wild geese regiments now agen repair
To the wet bosom of broad marshes there
In marching coloms and attention all
Listning and following their ringleaders call
The shepherd boy that hastens now and then
From hail and snow beneath his sheltering den
Of flags or file leavd sedges tyd in sheaves

Or stubble shocks oft as his eye perceives
Sun threads struck out wi momentary smiles
Wi fancy thoughts his loneliness beguiles
Thinking the struggling winter hourly bye
As down the edges of the distant sky
The hailstorm sweeps-and while he stops to strip
The stooping hedgbriar of its lingering hip
He hears the wild geese gabble oer his head
And pleasd wi fancys in his musings bred
He marks the figurd forms in which they flye
And pausing follows wi a wandering eye
Likening their curious march in curves or rows
To every letter which his memory knows
While far above the solitary crane
Swings lonely to unfrozen dykes again
Cranking a jarring mellancholy cry
Thro the wild journey of the cheerless sky
Full oft at early seasons mild and fair....

March bids farewell wi garlands in her hair
Of hazzel tassles woodbines hairy sprout
And sloe and wild plumb blossoms peeping out...

John Clare [1703-1864]