

The Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum

The Poetry Roundabout



in cyberspace

April 2021 edition

Here bygynneth the Book of the tales of Caunterbury

‘Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote,
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote.,
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,’

by Geoffrey Chaucer



Edited by John Coutts – Poet in Residence

This month's edition offers a variety of work: a wise word from Bengal, a spoof on the Canterbury Tales, and an insight into the value of poetry as a blessing in time of memory loss: plus new poems from our own contributors, and much more...

Jeff Kemp offers *'this poem as an example of poetry from Bengal, where songs and poems are very important. Lalon Fakir is the most important folk-logic example (Rabindranath Tagore is better known and much more socially-elevated)'*

People ask, what is Lalon's caste?
Lalon says, my eyes fail to detect
The signs of caste. Don't you see that
Some wear garlands, some rosaries
Around the neck? But does it make any
Difference brother? O, tell me,
What mark does one carry when
One is born, or when one dies?
A Muslim is marked by the sign
Of circumcision; but how should
You mark a woman? If a Brahmin male
Is known by the thread he wears,
How is a woman known? People of the world,
O brother, talk of marks and signs,
But Lalon says: I have only dissolved
The raft of signs, the marks of caste
In the deluge of the One!

Jock Stein writes: *I chose 'The Flower' because it was Spring, but also because it hints of heaven, and the Duke of Edinburgh passed away this morning, in this Easter week. Yet the poem also brings us back to the heart of life, with the rainbow of God's coming and going. Thomas is often thought to be the poet of the absence of God, but how large grew his soul as he wrestled with the contradictions of his life, and held on to his faith.*

The Flower

I asked for riches.

You gave me the earth, the sea,

the immensity

of the broad sky. I looked at them

and learned that I must withdraw

to possess them. I gave my eyes

and my ears, and dwelt

in a soundless darkness

in the shadow

of your regard.

The soul

grew in me, filling me

with its fragrance.

Men came

to me from the four

winds to hear me speak

of the unseen flower by which

I sat, whose roots were not

In the soil, nor its petals the colour

of the wide sea; that was

its own species, with its own

sky over it, shot

with the rainbow of your coming and going.

R.S. Thomas

Alastair Duncan tells us that has been enjoying the Roundabouts 'as a silent reader'. Here now is his own contribution.

Lockdown Blues

The lockdown blues, the lockdown blues,
When every day brings more bad news,
When the days grow short and your hair grows long,
When the wifi wilts and the tele goes wrong,
When nowt's to be had from the shops in town
Cos they're all shut up if they're not closed down,
When day slips seamless into day
So where time goes you just can't say,
When your kids are banned though they live close by,
And you're sure the Apocalypse is nigh,
Take heart! Here's just the thrill you seek:
Count the excitements of the week.

On Monday comes a cheerful shout:
"You forgot again to take the dustbin out".
On Tuesday, if you remembered the bin,
You can double your pleasure by bringing it in.
On Wednesday the Singers rehearse on Zoom:
You sing on your own in your lonely room.
Thursday and Friday are difficult creatures
For neither has any salient features.
You don't know where you are or when
Till Saturday comes round again:
Out to the Co-op you skip and caper
For today's the day you buy a paper.
But Sunday, for treats, is miles ahead.
It starts with breakfast for two in bed.
Then comes a threesome with a star:
You and her and Andrew Marr.
To cap it all, if you dress in a hurry,
You might get a glimpse of the Bishop of Moray.

Laura Fyfe sends *'Remembrance Bridge – 'written on Remembrance Sunday, 2017, meeting friends on Stirling Bridge, and in a coordinated event across the world, after a traumatic few years in Scottish and British politics and three days after Trump won the US presidential election)*

Remembrance Bridge

We looked upriver
to the water flowing towards us
and put the world to rights.
Recriminations, hope,
despair for our children.

We turned to watch the future
slip out of sight
shoulder to shoulder
hands on stone.

We threw our prayers down only
to see them sink
and hoped one day
downriver
they'd rise once more.

Below us,
the world reflected.

In that dark water
We saw only shadows.
We hugged our warmth to each other.

Rain fell on our cheeks,
our lips.

Below us
in that moment
the river seemed still.

Helen McLaren writes: *'I've just finished reading a very good book about the wren by Stephen Moss and this poem was in it.'*

The Wren

by John Clare

Why is the cuckoo's melody preferred
And nightingale's rich song so fondly praised
In poet's rhymes? Is there no other bird
Of nature's minstrelsy that oft hath raised
One's heart to extacy and mirth as well?
I judge not how another's taste is caught:
With mine, there's other birds that bear the bell
Whose song that crowds of happy memories brought.
Such the wood-robin singing in the dell
And little wren that many a time hath sought
Shelter from showers in huts where I did dwell
In early spring the tenant of the plain
Tenting my sheep and still they come to tell
The happy stories of the past again.

Elizabeth Lawson recommends *'Miracle on St David's Day'* by Gillian Clarke

*'They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude'*

– *'The Daffodils'* by W. Wordsworth

An afternoon yellow and open-mouthed
with daffodils. The sun treads the path
among cedars and enormous oaks.
It might be a country house, guests strolling,
the rumps of gardeners between nursery shrubs.
I am reading poetry to the insane.
An old woman, interrupting, offers
as many buckets of coal as I need.
A beautiful chestnut-haired boy listens
entirely absorbed. A schizophrenic
on a good day, they tell me later.
In a cage of first March sun a woman
sits not listening, not seeing, not feeling.
In her neat clothes the woman is absent.
A big, mild man is tenderly led
to his chair. He has never spoken.
His labourer's hands on his knees, he rocks
gently to the rhythms of the poems.
I read to their presences, absences,
to the big, dumb labouring man as he rocks.
He is suddenly standing, silently,
huge and mild, but I feel afraid. Like slow
movement of spring water or the first bird
of the year in the breaking darkness,
the labourer's voice recites *'The Daffodils'*.
The nurses are frozen, alert; the patients
seem to listen. He is hoarse but word-perfect.
Outside the daffodils are still as wax,
a thousand, ten thousand, their syllables
unspoken, their creams and yellows still.

Forty years ago, in a Valleys school,
the class recited poetry by rote.
Since the dumbness of misery fell
he has remembered there was a music
of speech and that once he had something to say.
When he's done, before the applause, we observe
the flowers' silence. A thrush sings
and the daffodils are flame.
From Gillian Clarke's [Selected Poems](#)

Colin Gregory writes: *'For the April Roundabout I looked for something on a Chaucerian theme and discovered 'St Abe and His Seven Wives, A Tale of Salt Lake City', by Robert Buchanan (1841-1901). Polygamy had not yet been abolished in the Mormon Church and most of the book is devoted to the story of Abraham Clewson's (St Abe's) entanglements with his seven wives, but I've chosen an extract from the prologue and the first tale about a man whose love is snatched from him by another five times married already.'*

Honest Chaucer, thee I greet
In a verse with blithesome feet,
And tho' modern bards may stare,
Crack a passing joke with Care!
Take a merry song and true
Fraught with inner meanings too!
Goodman Dull may croak and scowl:—
Leave him hooting to the owl!
Tight-laced Prudery may turn
Angry back with eyes that burn,
Reading on from page to page
Scrofulous novels of the age!
Fools may frown and humbugs rail,
Not for them I tell the Tale;
Not for them, but souls like thee,
Wise old English JOLLITY!

APPROACHING UTAH.—THE BOSS'S TALE.

"Along this way one summer night,

Jest as I meant to take the prize,
Passed an APOSTLE—dern his eyes!
On his old pony, gravel-eyed,
His legs a-dangling down each side,
With twinkling eyes and wheedling smile,
Grinning beneath his broad-brimm'd tile,
With heer all scent and shaven face,
He came a-trotting to the place.

'Twarn't every day, I reckon, they
Saw an Apostle pass their way!
And Cissy, being kind o' soft,
And empty in the upper loft,
Was full of downright joy and pride
To hev thet saint at her fireside—
One of the seventy they call
The holiest holy—dern 'em all!
O he was 'cute and no mistake,
Deep as Salt Lake, and wide awake!

Three nights he stayed, and every night
He squeezed her hand a bit more tight;
And every night he didn't miss
To give a loving kiss to Ciss;
And tho' his fust was on her brow,
He ended with her mouth, somehow.
O, but he was a knowing one,
The Apostle Hiram Higginson!

When I drew up, all things were still.
I saw the boys far up the hill
Tossin' the hay; but at the door
No Cissy stood as oft afore.
Under the fruit-trees' shade I pass'd, . . .
Thro' the green bushes, . . . and at last
Found, as the furthest path I trode,
The gel I wanted. Ye . . . s! by — — !
"The gel I wanted—ay, I found
More than I wanted, you'll be bound!
Theer, seated on a wooden cheer,

With bows and ribbons in her heer,
Her hat a-swinging on a twig
Close by, sat Ciss in her best rig,
And at her feet that knowing one,
The Apostle Hiram Higginson!

They were too keen to notice me,
So I held back behind a tree
And watch'd 'em. Never night nor day
Did I see Cissy look so gay,
Her eyes all sparkling blue and bright,
Her face all sanctified delight.
She hed her gown tuck'd up to show
Embrider'd petticoat below,
And jest a glimpse, below the white,
Of dainty leg in stocking tight
With crimson clocks; and on her knee
She held an open book, which he,
Thet dern'd Apostle at her feet,
With her low milking-stool for seat,
Was reading out all clear and pat,
Keeping the place with finger fat;
Creeping more close to book and letter
To feel the warmth of his text better,

"At last he stops for lack of wind,
And smiled with sarcy double-chinn'd
Fat face at Cissy, while she cried,
Rocking herself from side to side,
'O Bishop, them are words of bliss!'
And then he gev a long fat kiss
On her warm hand, and edged his stool
Still closer. Could a man keep cool
And see it? Trembling thro' and thro'
I walked right up to thet theer two,
And caught the dern'd old lump of duff
Jest by the breeches and the scruff,
And chuck'd him off, and with one kick
Sent his stool arter him right slick—
While Cissy scream'd with frighten'd face,

‘Spare him! O spare that man of grace!’

“‘Spare him!’ I cried, and gev a shout,
‘What’s this yer shine you air about—
What cuss is this that I jest see
With that big book upon your knee,
Cuddling up close and making sham
To read a heap of holy flam?’

“And then I stoop’d and took a peep
At what they’d studied at so deep,
And read, for I can read a bit,
‘The Book of Mormon’—what was writ
By the first Saint of all the lot,
Mad Joseph, him the Yankees shot.
Then, for my blood was up, I took
One kick at thet infernal book,
And tho’ the Apostle guv a cry,
Into the well I made it fly,
And turning to the Apostle cried,
‘Tho’ thet theer Scriptur’ is your guide,
You’d best depart without delay,
Afore you sink in the same way!
And sure as fate you’ll wet your skin
If you come courting yer agin!’

Colin adds : *‘I’d not come across Buchanan before, I discovered him when looking through an old volume of the magazine The Idler from 1893 in which he’d written about his friend David Gray from Kirkintilloch, a poet who sadly died aged 23. Buchanan:[<http://www.robertbuchanan.co.uk/html/stabe.html>.] published St Abe anonymously, because he felt (with justification) that critics would be kinder than if they knew it was his work.’*

Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh [1861-1922] wrote

"I wish I loved the Human Race;
I wish I loved its silly face;
I wish I liked the way it walks;
I wish I liked the way it talks;
And when I'm introduced to one,
I wish I thought "What Jolly Fun!"

Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh must not be confused with **Sir Walter Raleigh** [1554?-1618], poet, courtier, politician and adventurer.



Sir Walter Raleigh to his son: **‘Three things there be: the wood the weed the wag.’**

‘The wood’ is the timber that builds the gallows, ‘the weed’ is the rope, and the ‘wag’ is the clever lad who may end up by being hanged. ‘Young Wat’ [poignantly pictured above] was not be hanged. He lost his life while taking part in his father’s final futile attempt to discover El Dorado.

Three things there be that prosper up apace
And flourish, whilst they grow asunder far,
But on a day, they meet all in one place,
And when they meet, they one another mar;
And they be these: the wood, the weed, the wag.
The wood is that which makes the gallow tree;
The weed is that which strings the hangman's bag;
The wag, my pretty knave, betokeneth thee.
Mark well, dear boy, whilst these assemble not,
Green springs the tree, hemp grows, the wag is wild,
But when they meet, it makes the timber rot,
It frets the halter, and it chokes the child.
Then bless thee, and beware, and let us pray
We part not with thee at this meeting day.

And to end: John Coutts recalls a memorable experience.

SATURDAY EVENING SERVICE IN MOSCOW

At the church of Novodevichy Convent, Moscow, October 1990

[It was just before the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the shops were empty. A funeral service ['otpevanie' – 'singing away'] was in progress and the coffin was open to reveal the face of the deceased. Spartak are, of course, a famous Moscow soccer team.]

Old friend, you took me by surprise.
I felt a sudden twinge of dread.
Your face was oddly still - your eyes
Were shut: you whispered, 'Yes... I'm dead.'

Lying in humble state I found you
Near the shimmering candle-stall:
A boy and girl ran rings around you;
But people didn't mind at all.

At last a bearded bishop came.
They rolled the carpet up behind;
The cantor's voice was roaring flame.
The echoing choir was cool and kind.

Your life I do not dare to guess:
What queues you joined, what floors you polished;
Years of terror... dumb distress;
Churches shuttered, hope demolished;

Stalin's cunning rape of truth -
Adolf Hitler's rude rampaging...
Did they snap off your scented youth,
And bruise your slow and painful ageing?

Were you a scamp? A sad disgrace?
A humble bread-and-ruble-winner?
I cannot read your silent face.
Have mercy Lord, on me, a sinner.

And here's the waiting coffin-lid...
I wish we had the time to stay...
With Christ in God your life is hid:
The people sing your soul away

As I observe the cloud of light
That crowns a larger, noisier shrine:
For Spartak play at home tonight...
While Muscovites must stand in line

For salt and sausage, cheese and bread.
The young and echoing choir replies
That Christ is risen from the dead.
Old friend, you took me by surprise.