

# The Virtual Poetry Group

*led by Ian Clark, Thursday 21 May 2020.*  
*UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Tuesday 26 May 2020*

## **Present:**

Jonathan Atkinson  
Veronica Carolan  
Ian Clark  
Adele Duffield  
Roger Gould  
Lesley Pemberton  
Sue Thomason

Welcome to our fifth Virtual Poetry Group of the lockdown, which “met” on Thursday 21 May 2020.

Please comment on each poem and send your comments to me, by Monday night, 25 May.  
It will help me manage my inbox if you choose a subject line for the email containing VPG plus the date of the moot. Example: VPG\_21\_May\_2020.pdf

Just open the email again which has the PDF attached to it and press **Reply**.

When I get your comments back I will append them to the appropriate contribution in an update to these proceedings, which I will email back to you as: VPG\_21\_May\_2020[COMMENTED].pdf

For reference, there's a list of past (commented) PDFs here:

[www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings](http://www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings)

Click an item on the list, and the chosen PDF will be downloaded to your computer.



## **Matters Arising:**

### **ADELE**

Could I just comment on the poem I submitted last time - *A damn good reason to wash before use* - for clarification as (I think it was Veronica) wondered whether the first line was necessary- the formatting went a bit off and the first line was actually the poem's title so it would not be read as part of the poem.

## SUE

General Apology: I seem to be particularly unreceptive/unperceptive at the moment, so apologies in advance to everyone I have misunderstood.

## ADELE

I haven't commented on the guest poems as such because each one takes so long to absorb and think about as well as our own poems, so adding commentary to the mix make this an endless task. However, I must say most were new on me, but Tarantella struck me in particular as such an intriguing poem – I loved the use of assonance and movement of sound throughout. Great to read out loud. A good selection by everyone with much variation this week, so very entertaining, thank you all.

## IAN

Apologies from me too: I'm pushed for time to get this out, so I'm omitting commenting on the guest poems.



## 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 smokeless 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

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### VERONICA

In this sonnet Wordsworth transports me to a Westminster that can only exist in the imagination in this 24/7 world. Although he has to resort to 'glideth' to make the line scan, which seems to be out of period, he succeeds in evoking a stillness enhanced by the silent movement of the river. A gem.

### LESLEY

Wordsworth saw a very different London in 1802 to what it is in the 21st century. Perhaps you chose this poem because people in towns and cities around the country, due to lockdown, are now noticing 'the sky', 'smokeless air' and 'all that mighty heart is lying still'?

### ROGER

WW is not one of my favourites but I always think this is one of his best.

# Veronica Carolan

## **hag riding**

why  
is what i ask myself  
maybe it is the afrikan in me  
still trying to get home  
after all these years  
but when i wake to the heat of morning  
galloping down the highway of my life  
something hopeful rises in me  
rises and runs me out into the road  
and i lob my fierce thigh high  
over the rump of the day and honey  
i ride i ride

Lucille Clifton  
from *Blessing the Boats, New and Selected Poems*  
1988-2000 (BOA Editions Ltd, 2000)

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### VERONICA

I love this short poem. It is so alive and is the very antithesis of the lethargy I feel when inclined to have another half hour's snooze in the morning. The energy she captures in the idea of mounting the day like a horse and taking control of the gallop, is wonderful.

### LESLEY

I really didn't understand much of what this poem is about – someone trying to get back to their roots? Why “hag riding”? I don't know if it was the original typography or if it got changed in reproduction to us, but the lack of capitalisation seems incongruous. The next to last line “rump of the day and honey” is a mystery to me!

### ROGER

What fabulous energy and interesting use of typography. A new poet to me but wonderful images.

Ian Clark

## The Cool Web

Children are dumb to say how hot the day is,  
How hot the scent is of the summer rose,  
How dreadful the black wastes of evening sky,  
How dreadful the tall soldiers drumming by,

But we have speech, to chill the angry day,  
And speech to dull the rose's cruel scent,  
We spell away the overhanging night,  
We spell away the soldiers and the fright.

There's a cool web of language winds us in,  
Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:  
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die  
In brininess and volubility.

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,  
Throwing off language and its watery clasp  
Before our death, instead of when death comes,  
Facing the wide glare of the children's day,  
Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,  
We shall go mad, no doubt, and die that way.

Robert Graves

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### VERONICA

A profound poem. Children cannot make use of the nuances of language. To have the command of a wide vocabulary gives us power to fix our experience by naming it precisely, nailing it down and shaping it within our

own (safe) parameters. This gives a sense of control, whereas young children feel first and experience life more directly. We are the ones who lose our spontaneity and the vulnerability we had before we learned the power of description.

## LESLEY

Graves's poem is about words and language – or so I have read – how we can use them to express ourselves or 'dull' bad/painful experiences. Although it is a short poem, I will have to reread it to understand it more.

Interesting he used the word "web" in the context of communication, which I used in my poem 'The Silent Web' in the previous VPG (but was not aware of Graves's poem when I wrote that). I wonder if Tim Berners-Lee, 'inventor' of the World Wide Web made reference to "The Cool Web" when naming the new global communication system, or did he envisage the 'web' of communication himself?

I've strayed a little from the poem here but thanks, Ian, for giving me something to muse on.

## ROGER

Very clever reflection on the power and protection we find in words. Ingenious repetition of ideas/images.

## IAN

In my 20s I was deeply impressed by Jean-Paul Sartre: *The Age Of Reason*, considered by some the defining exposition of Existentialism. Formerly I thought of myself (the part that mattered) to be the talking part, the rest being just so much evolutionary lumber. Sartre's contention, that we shield ourselves from the egregiousness of existence by means of language and its (mis)use for classification, cracked my mental foundations.

In this poem, which I've only just discovered, I see Robert Graves propounding the identical notion. Was he influenced by Sartre, or were his ideas independently arrived at? Was it something obvious to all the survivors of WW1: how propaganda and its choice of patriotic jingle-jangle numbed a generation to the horrors it was collaborating in?

Jill Bolte Taylor, from the pov of a neurologist, reminds us *we are feeling creatures that think, not thinking creatures that feel*. A point that completely escaped me as I was growing up. And Isaac Asimov's first published short story hinged on the conceit that a rational species that had never seen the starry night-sky would be driven mad by its first sight of it.

# Adele Duffield

## An Arundel Tomb

Side by side, their faces blurred,  
The earl and countess lie in stone,  
Their proper habits vaguely shown  
As jointed armour, stiffened pleat,  
And that faint hint of the absurd —  
The little dogs under their feet.

Such plainness of the pre-baroque  
Hardly involves the eye, until  
It meets his left-hand gauntlet, still  
Clasped empty in the other; and  
One sees, with a sharp tender shock,  
His hand withdrawn, holding her hand.

They would not think to lie so long.  
Such faithfulness in effigy  
Was just a detail friends would see:  
A sculptor's sweet commissioned grace  
Thrown off in helping to prolong  
The Latin names around the base.

They would not guess how early in  
Their supine stationary voyage  
The air would change to soundless damage,  
Turn the old tenantry away;  
How soon succeeding eyes begin  
To look, not read. Rigidly they

Persisted, linked, through lengths and breadths  
Of time. Snow fell, undated. Light  
Each summer thronged the glass. A bright  
Litter of birdcalls strewed the same  
Bone-riddled ground. And up the paths  
The endless altered people came,

Washing at their identity.  
Now, helpless in the hollow of  
An unarmorial age, a trough  
Of smoke in slow suspended skeins  
Above their scrap of history,  
Only an attitude remains:

Time has transfigured them into  
Untruth. The stone fidelity  
They hardly meant has come to be  
Their final blazon, and to prove  
Our almost-instinct almost true:  
What will survive of us is love.

Philip Larkin  
*Witsun Weddings*

## VERONICA

A well-known poem and very descriptive. Larkin shares the penetrating insight that in choosing to capture a single gesture in stone, which is a long-lasting monument, inevitably prolongs that one momentary gesture and gives it a weight of truth that it was never intended to have. This is a kind of untruth, as it excludes all other possibilities and realities. The same goes for recording history in its widest sense. That said, I find Larkin's ending rather sad in his cynical presumption that a symbol of love undergirding a couple's life, a glimpse of human relationship, is not entirely 'true' and therefore misleading.

## LESLEY

The poem submitted by Veronica was about Larkin and you have provided one of his poems for us to read. No collaboration between the two of you?

I like this poem (new to me). It is 'hardness' and 'softness' intertwined, e.g.,

"...jointed armour, stiffened pleat"/"His hand...holding her hand".

Fine details are observed and the 'absurdity' of "The little dogs under their feet".

The last line "What will survive of us is love" brings a somewhat bleak scene to a beautiful end.

## ROGER

This was a poem I knew but which stayed with me from first reading until re-reading to comment. The reflective detail is fascinating, I like Larkin and I think this is marvellous.



# Roger Gould

## Tarantella

Do you remember an Inn,  
Miranda?  
Do you remember an Inn?  
And the tedding and the spreading  
Of the straw for a bedding,  
And the fleas that tease in the High Pyrenees,  
And the wine that tasted of tar?  
And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers  
(Under the vine of the dark veranda)?  
Do you remember an Inn, Miranda,  
Do you remember an Inn?  
And the cheers and the jeers of the young muleteers  
Who hadn't got a penny,  
And who weren't paying any,  
And the hammer at the doors and the din?  
And the hip! hop! hap!  
Of the clap  
Of the hands to the swirl and the twirl  
Of the girl gone chancing,  
Glancing,  
Dancing,  
Backing and advancing,  
Snapping of the clapper to the spin  
Out and in--  
And the ting, tong, tang of the guitar!  
Do you remember an Inn,  
Miranda?  
Do you remember an Inn?

Never more;  
Miranda,  
Never more.  
Only the high peaks hoar;  
And Aragon a torrent at the door.  
No sound  
In the walls of the halls where falls  
The tread  
Of the feet of the dead to the ground,  
No sound:  
But the boom  
Of the far waterfall like doom.

Hilaire Belloc

## VERONICA

<https://susannahfullerton.com.au/poem-of-the-month-tarantella/>

Another well-known poem. There are conflicting accounts of who Miranda was, but the above URL takes you to a commentary on the poem's history which I find convincing. There is also a clip of Belloc himself singing his own words, unaccompanied, which sheds light on the poem itself. The poem captures both the poverty and the celebration of life in the Spanish Pyrenees in a single snapshot, whilst recognising it as a time long gone.

## LESLEY

A rhythmic poem that echoes the fast-paced dance of the tarantella. What more is there to say except he is reminiscing about a past enjoyable experience that cannot be re-lived.

## DREAMS

Hold fast to dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.

Langston Hughes  
*1922*

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### VERONICA

After the last VPG I was moved to look up Langston Hughes on U Tube, where you can hear him reading his own verse. I have loved this poem for a long time. Its pithy shortness lends itself to constant reminder. Another take on 'maturity' versus 'youth', perhaps.

### ROGER

Beautiful imagery, elegantly eloquent.

# Sue Thomason

*"Pangur Bán" is an Old Irish poem, written about the 9th century at or around Reichenau Abbey. It was written by an Irish monk, and is about his cat. Pangur Bán ("White Pangur").*

## Pangur Bán

I and Pangur Bán, my cat,  
'Tis a like task we are at;  
Hunting mice is his delight,  
Hunting words I sit all night.

Better far than praise of men  
'Tis to sit with book and pen;  
Pangur bears me no ill-will,  
He too plies his simple skill.

'Tis a merry thing to see  
At our tasks how glad are we,  
When at home we sit and find  
Entertainment to our mind.

Oftentimes a mouse will stray  
In the hero Pangur's way;  
Oftentimes my keen thought set  
Takes a meaning in its net.

'Gainst the wall he sets his eye  
Full and fierce and sharp and sly;  
'Gainst the wall of knowledge I  
All my little wisdom try.

When a mouse darts from its den,  
O how glad is Pangur then!  
O what gladness do I prove  
When I solve the doubts I love!

So in peace our tasks we ply,  
Pangur Ban, my cat, and I;  
In our arts we find our bliss,  
I have mine and he has his.

Practice every day has made  
Pangur perfect in his trade;  
I get wisdom day and night  
Turning darkness into light.

Robin Flower  
(Author of original: Unknown)

## VERONICA

Anyone who has a cat will understand the companionship and complementarity expressed in this poem. Who would have thought that writing and hunting could be brought together in such a charming way?

## LESLEY

I love cats, *ergo* I like this poem...but what a considerate cat was Pangur Ban. Those who have cats know how they always insist on sitting on the book/magazine you are trying to read, the paper on which you are trying to write or your laptop/tablet/keyboard that you are trying to use! Pangur Ban was obviously distracted by his hunting of mice to leave the cleric alone with his thoughts and search for words.

(Seamus Heaney has a different translation of this poem but it retains the same essence.)

## ROGER

What an incredibly clever piece of writing and one I didn't know, so thank you.

Now for our own poems...



# Jonathan Atkinson

*written at a literary weekend at Scargill House, Kettlewell, Wharfedale.*

## Lambs

The lambs, compression springs of joy,  
that leap  
from sleep  
to urgent play,

These balls of white-hot energy  
that run  
for fun  
round fields of dry-stoned grey,

These vital suck-machines,  
whose tails  
like flails  
thresh chaff from empty air,

Better they do not know  
their play  
today  
leads but to sacrifice;

Better they do not know  
how soon  
how bitterly soon  
they grow to fatstock size and table-weight;

Or that he who made the lamb, the farmer, the butcher,  
could find  
no better name  
for his own son than lamb,

Or that that lamb, like them  
was born  
one freezing morn  
like them to die for our convenience.

## VERONICA

I like the onomatopoeic rhymes and the sheer delight in the young lambs that you portray in the first half of the poem. The second half echoes the sentiments of 'All in the April Evening' but is slightly heavier - it feels a little moralistic in contrast to the first few verses. I wonder if 'them' in the last line should read 'him', otherwise it doesn't make sense and rather detracts from what you are expressing.

## LESLEY

A poem that starts off with a joyous picture of the newborn lambs – but, oh, what fate awaits them! I love to see the lambs in early Spring (I like your analogy “springs of joy” – was that intentional?). However I try not to think of their ‘sacrifice’ because, being an omnivore, I admit that lamb is my favourite meat. Apologies to anyone who is veggie/vegan.

The poem progresses to “he who made the lamb...” with Biblical reference to God’s own Son, I assume. Maybe you should capitalise the “he”, etc.,? Not sure of the last line and “convenience” but what of an alternative? If it is on a Biblical theme, perhaps “like them to die as sacrifice for us”?

## SUE

First 4 verses are brilliant: concise and accurate. Last 3 verses are structurally much less tight, and... are they really needed? And if you do need a verse after verse 4, could the sense of the last 3 verses be compressed into a scanning, rhyming version of “better they do not know how soon Easter will come”? I wonder if “he who made the lamb” is too direct an evocation of Blake’s Tyger, and I’m not at all sure that “Jesus died for our convenience” is orthodox theology.

## IAN

I agree with Sue. The first 4 verses make a stunning poem in themselves. Their energetic mechanistic metaphors are surprising and original, and permanently stretch my perception of these beasts. That final word *sacrifice* concentrates all the meaning diffused throughout the 3 verses that follow. With all that compressed energy it cracks like the tip of a bullwhip.

## ADELE

I like the way you have chosen the line breaks and indentations for this poem which makes it jumpy and vibrant just like the lambs at play. Not sure that the two very long lines work as well as the rest in the middle of the poem, when the tone changes. They seem a little too clunky in comparison. Maybe lose the word ‘size’ or rephrase to say ‘they grow fat for the table’ and do actually need the words ‘the farmer, the butcher’ at all? That said, I like the comparison to Jesus and the juxtapositions of the sacrifice. Good poem, I think.

## ROGER

I think this is a fine poem. I love description of the lambs and the transition from fatstock to faith. I liked the echo of Blake in the penultimate stanza.



# Veronica Carolan

## Larkin – A Sketch

Earnest in spectacles  
the thin man with compressed lips  
converses with his friend or sits alone,  
surrounded by gravestones softened by cow parsley.  
Balding, rain-coated, long-legged,  
the man with no enemies  
whose friends do not like him,  
ranges the fish-tanged streets  
or stands to watch the catch brought in.  
Creels and cobbles, cranes and crowds  
captured on camera; he faithfully records  
the settings of his life in black and white,  
and then in pencilled, hard won verse  
processes thoughts and fixes what he's seen.  
Black and white? Perhaps – a bookish man  
high-fêted by degree, achieving solid public gain  
in stone; yet privately  
he needed to express a different side  
through sarcasm, wit and scathing honesty.  
Faithful poet, fickle lover, he calls the tune and gets his way:  
two women balanced, then a third,  
while memories of parent hell prevent too close a thrall;  
he lives alone, returning after work's familiar toad  
to drown his sorrows in acerbity.  
In observations of the aged infirm,  
in shocking words expressed, he hides  
compassion for senility.  
Confirmed in unbelief, he walks too soon the Cemetery Road,  
en route to immortality.

11.5.20

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### VERONICA

I wrote this whilst watching AN Wilson's documentary "Larkinland" (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p034j5lx/>). Originally in stanzas but these were 'lost in translation', this seems ok as one long poem. The reference to 'solid gain in stone' can refer either to the Brynmor Jones library - Larkin oversaw the first phase of

the building of this library and reworked its original plans; or to the statue of Larkin in Hull commissioned by the City Council. He referred to work as a "toad" and kept one (a frog, in fact!) on his desk in the library.

#### LESLEY

I take it the poem is meant to portray the life of Philip Larkin. Not knowing anything about him, apart from being a poet, it led me to looking up some information and broadened my education a little.

I thought, on first reading your poem, the phrase "work's familiar toad" was an error, but I now know that Larkin used the word "toad" to describe his view of work.

#### SUE

I understand what this poem is about! And it does capture an essence, a set of significant details, a flavour; it's a very successful, beautifully observed, biographical-poem-sketch. I enjoyed reading it. (And, um, it would anthologise well...)

#### IAN

Some poets you just wouldn't want to know. Do they distil their souls out onto paper, leaving a twisty cinder? Perhaps to do it sustainably, you have to distil other people's? But as a pencil sketch in words this poem is accomplished. It convinces me I'm looking at a real man.

#### ADELE

Funny how you have written a poem about Larkin when I chose a guest poem by him. Always loved his work so really like the idea of you writing a poem about him. I think you have got him just about right here. Love 'the man with no enemies whose friends do not like him' – just right! You even got in a toad, well done! I think his accusatory language and opinion of others often said more about his own struggles with normality by suggesting they were at fault when really it was him. Thanks Veronica, I enjoyed this.

#### ROGER

Part of the synchronicity that slips into our group that you and Adele both thought of Larkin. I think you've got him pretty well. A pity no jazz, his criticism was respected, but a good sketch with a glancing reference to Heaney, I think; I plead ignorance to the connection. I liked it very much.

# Ian Clark

*"Just beneath the waves off the Hawaiian coast, there are schools of tropical fish, flotillas of sea turtles, and squads of squid..." <https://www.atlasobscura.com/unusual-trips/hawaii-squid-science>*

## Squid Squad

Dive off Hawaii to see squads of squids.  
Dig in your pockets, though it won't cost quids  
to see dolphin pods, plus squids in squads,  
to expand your minds and tan your bods.

If you imagine that it's all too odd –  
your eyelids droop and you start to nod –  
Consider what glee for attention bids,  
with schools of fish and squads of squids.

Squitty little squads squirt past all day:  
mid coral fans they frolic and play.  
Turtles by the ton, having dollops of fun,  
shimmer in the sea and sparkle in the sun.

Sea slugs, jellyfish, and all their kids,  
chase the little squirts of squads of squids,  
making all the kelp fronds sway and swish...  
Come to Hawaii 'cos it's everything you'd wish.



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VERONICA

This works really well when read aloud - rather like the Belloc poem. Very funny, clever and original.  
Thanks!

## LESLEY

A bit of a tongue-in-cheek, tongue twister! Fun to read.

## SUE

Another one for the Bestiary! And another song (I will definitely buy the album...). This is so squiddy and squaddy that I lost the sense of the sounds – and I don't care; it is fun to say “squid squad squid squad squid squad”, and fun is good.

## IAN

It's funny how a phrase you read can set off a chemical reaction that ends in a poem. I find **Atlas Obscura** wonderful for that. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/> Click and sign up for the email newsletter. It's the mental equivalent of physical jerks.

## ADELE

Love it! Lots of word play with alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia. Not one to perform after having a drink though. 😊 I think it really works and doesn't seem forced either. Very enjoyable.

## ROGER

Oh Ian, I wish I had your joyful gift of mischief with words, it is so clever.

# Adele Duffield

## Our Secret Escape

Let us rise from weekday monotony  
leave our bodies behind, lose ourselves  
entirely.

Go to a place of dreams where all is green  
and smiles upon you, whispering spirits into life,  
turning shadows into clouds with sun-lit downy edges  
that spring from your upturned hand,  
cartwheel in the air as bubbles blown  
from the mouths of wood nymphs.  
With each footprint left on a heady chamomile carpet,  
and mossy sphagnum sumptuously moist  
between bare toes,  
you melt

through the spongy surface of time,  
re-emerge a peachy water baby  
wide-eyed, wondrous, ephemeral being  
watching the filigree fairy folk dance  
with the damsels and  
dragonflies.

We'll be back again another day but,  
for now, our secret is locked away  
safely treasured behind  
a smile.

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### VERONICA

An imaginative, descriptive poem. Is this invitation to the reader or to a partner? This poem conveys the intimacy of a shared experience, so it only works for me if the reader is being drawn in to this secret place. I like the imagery of "bubbles blown from the mouths of wood nymphs"; however, I'm not sure about what is doing the cartwheeling - it doesn't quite make sense. Perhaps that is part of the dream-like quality you are trying to convey. Similarly, there is a mismatch between "leave your bodies behind" and the physicality of "sphagnum sumptuously moist (yes!) between bare toes". I'm left with questions rather than a sense of a shared experience.

## LESLEY

Some nice imagery in this poem but I'm not sure of its significance. The "place of dreams" doesn't seem to be a night-time dream, during sleep, because you mention "us" and "you" – it is something shared. Perhaps the aftermath of making love?

## SUE

I initially assumed this was a dream/daydream/fantasy/imaginary experience (because "leave our bodies behind, lose ourselves entirely") and so I was very confused by the physicality of "each footprint left on a heady chamomile carpet, and mossy sphagnum sumptuously moist between bare toes" because we have just left our bodies behind..? And then verse 3 is on or under the water, not on land? I wasn't sure whether "whispering spirits into life" meant, essentially, "cheering us up", or whether we can now see wood nymphs. I don't understand shadows turning into clouds that spring from the hand and do cartwheels; is it very cold and your damp hands are steaming? I don't understand who melts through time – is this the narrator remembering their now-grown child as a baby? The sound-music is lovely, and so are some of the images, but I haven't grasped the basic situation here...

## IAN

Thanks for reminding me Adele...

All the best fantasy is shared fantasy. And there's really only one to share it with.

Some people don't believe they've got a soul. Some think it's a wispy image of themselves that will live on – but perhaps not in a happy state. That's sad. But those who've been there know it's a land you can explore. If you explore it on your own (...dangerous!) you can meet people there. Some of those people are no longer here. And some of them never have been. But they might pop up in your life one day.

It's best explored with someone dear. But legal and social demands plus daily cares can lock you out of it. Then you need the key to get back in. And, like HC Andersen, you can spend the rest of your life looking for it.

## ROGER

Wonderfully sensuous. I dare not ask too much; it is one of your wonderful love songs.

# Roger Gould

## The father has the wish of the deed

Our organs may no longer play  
the good tunes;  
we continue to busk  
for the odd tokens thrown our way.  
Unpacked we are pitiful,  
unwrapped our allure lost  
but we study like teenagers,  
seek the comfort of company,  
the warmth in the night,  
the unconscious care of an arm;  
the understanding of years,  
the experience learned elsewhere,  
their solutions to our conundrums;  
our gifts to earn their delight.

Roger J Gould  
1.5.20

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### VERONICA

A sad poem, which captures so well the experience of loss of youth and a lost love. It has a lightness of touch which belies the poignancy of aging.

### LESLEY

I can't marry up the title with the poem, unless you are using the term "father" as a generic term as families would – that is, a wife might refer to her husband as 'father' in front of their children?

My interpretation of the poem is of an elderly couple who have gone beyond the ardour of passionate love but still find comfort in each other. The phrase "but we study like teenagers" seems out of place but must mean something to you.

### SUE

Don't understand the title. So it took me a while to grasp that these are not church organs which are not playing good tunes because the Devil has stolen all of those, nor are they medical organs like lungs and spleens which are not functioning quite so well as we get older, nor (I think) are they failing senses (our organs of sight, hearing etc.), so after a lot of head-scratching I guess they are genitalia. And that we are looking for some combination of love/sex/affection, and finding it with/among other older people?

### IAN

Roger reveals mysteries known only to the initiates of Old Age. Everyone's heard of Second Childhood, but Second Adolescence? The poem for me hinges on *we study like teenagers*. Do I think I know it all? Am I too old to learn anything more? Not a bit of it. I have a recurrent dream of going back to university – and flunking the entire Mathematics course. I wake up cringing with guilt – and resolve to pay more attention this time around.

## ADELE

This is a lovely poem with a suggestion of reflective loneliness woven through it, yet there is hope and a cheeky sparkle which endures to the end. Really well packed with thought-provoking comments. I do like it; says such a lot.



# Lesley Pemberton

## THE DYING SUN

As the sun sinks slowly in the sky  
It takes on so many different likenesses  
A fiery brand upheld  
By unseen hand  
A red and gaping wound  
Slashed through the clouds  
A streak of brightness  
Shedding light's last rays  
A warm and glowing mouth  
That talks about new days  
And, taking on so many different forms,  
The sinking sun must die to be reborn

Lesley Pemberton  
*undated; c1970s*

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### VERONICA

Nicely descriptive. We have all seen wonderful sunsets which invite yet defy capture in words. I recently came across the word "pareidolia" which is the word for seeing patterns and recognisable images in inanimate random arrangements. This is of the same ilk as anthropomorphism, I suppose. In the end, sunsets defy language and have to be experienced (cp The Cool Web).

### SUE

This is an interesting and slightly creepy set of images for sunset. What bothers me is the rhyme structure, which is... inconsistent. There's a vowel-echo between "sky" and "like"(nesses); a consonant-echo between "upheld" and "hand"; a visual echo (of "oud") between "wound" and "clouds"; "brightness" echoes back to "likeness"; "rays" and "days" are a true rhyming pair but the only pair that skips a line; "mouth" stuck between them echoes back to "clouds", and "forms" is a vowel-echo with "reborn". A little bit of tinkering and line-rearranging could make this all much tidier and more consistent.

Ditto the rhythm: I think this is a poem which is nudging towards 5-stress lines:

AS the SUN sinks SLOWly IN the SKY  
it TAKES on (so) MANY DIFFerent LIKEnesses  
a FIERy BRAND upHELD by UNseen HAND  
a RED and GAPing WOUND slashed THROUGH the CLOUDS  
a STREAK of BRIGHTness SHEDding LIGHT'S last RAYS  
a WARM and GLOWing MOUTH that TALKS (about) new DAYS  
and TAKing ON so MANY DIFFerent FORMS  
the SINKing SUN must DIE to BE reBORN

But if you tweak the lines like that to make the stress more regular, you lose the rhyme-scheme; I can't see an easy way to preserve both.

Finally, I don't like the first line; it contains too many "s" sounds and it's perilously close to the cliché "and as the sun sinks slowly in the West..."

## IAN

Another couplet and it's a sonnet. But only worth doing if an extra couplet adds real value.

A minor point: omit the word *so* to make the second line scan better.

Ditto the word *about* in line 10. When I read well-known poets I see scansion trumping grammar whenever the two collide. Poetry is more song than speech. Speech is structured by grammar, song by rhythm.

I have painted so many *soleils-couchants* in my time, and I have written so many poems about sunsets, taken so many photos – even timed how long it takes (...there's something curious about it if you don't know) I feel a bit of an expert on the topic. Yet reading Lesley's poem opens my eyes to aspects of the sun setting amid cloud that had escaped me.

Since that's what the poem is about, it might make the first line stronger to state it, e.g.

*as the sun sinks slowly into cloud*

...which draws it up out of the mists of cliché. Just a thought.

## ADELE

I love a sun set and the image is ever-changing as it sinks in the sky. This poem covers that thought process really well and the reader can imagine being there in that moment, being part of that daily cycle. Very strong in drawing on the senses of light and warmth, and there is a feeling of endurance – gaping wound, slashed, must die etc., remind us of the enormity of the universe beyond our humanity. Well done.

## ROGER

What marvellous images of the setting sun. Each pair of lines is a revelation. When I look at the whole thing, I wonder if the first pair and the last pair are needed?

# Sue Thomason

## How to wrestle with an angel

Grasp them firmly at the strong burning join  
of wing-root to shoulderblade, and don't let go.  
The agony's an embrace; thrust your hip against theirs,  
close your eyes, feel the spirit shift, and don't let go.  
Find your balance; try to keep your feet  
on the holy ground and don't let go.  
The angel will overmaster you. Don't give up,  
and whatever you do, don't let go. You must struggle all night  
and be thrown down again and again and again and again;  
the angel will break you. It will hurt. Don't give up.  
The angel will change in your grasp, lose all beauty and turn  
into nightmare, carrion, shit, fear, grief, despair.  
You may scream, but hold on. This is your only angel, yours  
to hold through the lonely night (it's okay if you cry),  
through exhaustion and into love and a new day's dawn.

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### VERONICA

Was this consciously based on the story of Jacob in Genesis 32, Sue? Commentators pose the unanswerable question as to whether this was a human or an angelic being, or even a manifestation of the Divine.

Sue's poem vividly depicts an experience of the archetypal struggle with the shadow which belongs to us all. By making it a commentary on how to go about it (like a recipe!), it has an authenticity. It speaks of a real wrestling with the darker side of our human experiences which has to be engaged with. In this poem, 'angel' is used not as an angelic being but as an avatar which challenges us to self-knowledge and eventual acceptance and integration, which is the human challenge.

"I would know my shadow and my light; then shall I at last be whole." (Michael Tippett - A Child of Our Time")

### LESLEY

An angel or an arch angel? (I deliberately separate the last two words).

Bryan Adams 'Don't let go of the things you believe in' is dedicated to his 'angel'.

### IAN

I love the inspired absurdity of writing apocalyptic literature (in the exegetic sense) in the homely idiom of the kitchen recipe – and then doing it into poetry.

Brought up as an RC, "wrestling with an angel" was something I thought only Jacob ever did (...Catholics don't have revelation in their lives, only dogma). But then, mixing with evangelicals at university, I learned that it was not an uncommon thing among rank-and-file believers in the free church. That and "speaking in tongues". This maybe informs Laini Taylor (*Daughter of Smoke and Bone*), who does for angels what Tolkien did for elves.

So what is "wrestling with an angel"? Obviously a metaphor, but what for? Battling with some agency so strong that the conclusion is foregone? (c/f Saul of Tarsus "kicking against the goads" Acts 26:14.) Resolving the mental tensions which inevitably afflict a spiritual pilgrim? Or a first encounter in bed with a new lover who needs to learn to be less clumsy? Or all those things at once – as Bilbo would say?

## ADELE

I'm really not sure whether this poem is intended as I am reading it. I find it quite disturbing. To me it appears to be a metaphor for an unhappy virginal bride with her brutish husband at the consummation of their marriage. This does not seem like love as it should be but simply acceptance of how it has to be. It seems quite cruel in this respect and, if I'm right, then he's no angel, and it's sad that she should feel there is no alternative to the abuse but to keep on accepting it (one too many 'again's). Even though it is a brutal poem, I don't like the word 'shit' in there. I'm funny with bad language in poetry. Some poems are perfect for it and it works well, but I don't think this is one of those occasions. Just my opinion. It will be interesting to see how everyone else interprets this poem. It is certainly a good one for making me think; cleverly done; but not a favourite for me Sue, sorry.

## ROGER

Troubling. You take us there with you. I had always considered angels powerful but benign; clearly this one is not. An interesting voice, matter of fact, and in instructing and advising it speaks to the writer's experience.