

The Virtual Poetry Group

led by Ian Clark, Thursday 18 June 2020.

UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Wednesday 24 June 2020

Present:

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

Welcome to our seventh Virtual Poetry Group of the lockdown, which “met” on Thursday 18 June.

Please comment on each poem and send your comments to me, by Monday night, 22 June. 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_18_Jun_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_18_Jun_2020[COMMENTED].pdf

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

www.whitbywriters.com/proceedings-of-virtual-meetings

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



Veronica Carolan

A Smuggler's Song

IF you wake at midnight, and hear a horse's feet,
Don't go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street,
Them that ask no questions isn't told a lie.
Watch the wall my darling while the Gentlemen go by.

Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark -
Brandy for the Parson, 'Baccy for the Clerk.
Laces for a lady; letters for a spy,
Watch the wall my darling while the Gentlemen go by !

Running round the woodlump if you chance to find
Little barrels, roped and tarred, all full of brandy-wine,
Don't you shout to come and look, nor use 'em for your play.
Put the brishwood back again - and they'll be gone next day !

If you see the stable-door setting open wide;
If you see a tired horse lying down inside;
If your mother mends a coat cut about and tore;
If the lining's wet and warm - don't you ask no more !

If you meet King George's men, dressed in blue and red,
You be careful what you say, and mindful what is said.
If they call you "pretty maid," and chuck you 'neath the chin,
Don't you tell where no one is, nor yet where no one's been !

Knocks and footsteps round the house - whistles after dark -
You've no call for running out till the house-dogs bark.
Trusty's here, and Pincher's here, and see how dumb they lie
They don't fret to follow when the Gentlemen go by !

'If You do as you've been told, 'likely there's a chance,
You'll be give a dainty doll, all the way from France,
With a cap of Valenciennes, and a velvet hood -
A present from the Gentlemen, along 'o being good !

Five and twenty ponies,
Trotting through the dark -
Brandy for the Parson, 'Baccy for the Clerk.
Them that asks no questions isn't told a lie -
Watch the wall my darling while the Gentlemen go by !

Rudyard Kipling

LESLEY

A 'cautionary tale', as Ian's offering, but far less gruesome – and there's a reward of a doll for the child if she keeps quiet about the strange goings-on. It has a jaunty rhythm, like the 'trotting of the ponies'. I can imagine this being set in Robin Hood's Bay.

An 'exceedingly good' poem by Mr Kipling (forgive the reference to the adverts for cakes, it must be those photos that Ian included).

ADELE

Very predictable Kipling poem. I used to love his poetry when I was a child.

ROGER

Some years ago I was on a residential drama course and one of the lectures was about use of accent. The speaker suggested that if you read *Smugglers Song* with an Ulster accent it suddenly became much more scary.

IAN

I read a lot of Kipling in my younger days. Loved *Kim*, his only novel, and *Plain Tales from the Hills*. But I don't remember this poem. It evokes for me the smuggling skulduggery of the Romney Marsh, an area I knew well (I grew up in East Sussex). Kipling spent his final decades in East Sussex, so he almost certainly knew of Russell Thorndike's character, Dr Syn, the vicar of Dymchurch and leader of the local smugglers.

Ian Clark

Jim

Who ran away from his Nurse, and was eaten by a Lion.

There was a Boy whose name was Jim;
His Friends were very good to him.
They gave him Tea, and Cakes, and Jam,
And slices of delicious Ham,
And Chocolate with pink inside
And little Tricycles to ride,
And read him Stories through and through,
And even took him to the Zoo—
But there it was the dreadful Fate
Befell him, which I now relate.

You know—at least you ought to know,
For I have often told you so—
That Children never are allowed
To leave their Nurses in a Crowd;
Now this was Jim's especial Foible,
He ran away when he was able,
And on this inauspicious day
He slipped his hand and ran away!

He hadn't gone a yard when—Bang!
With open Jaws, a lion sprang,
And hungrily began to eat
The Boy: beginning at his feet.
Now, just imagine how it feels
When first your toes and then your heels,
And then by gradual degrees,
Your shins and ankles, calves and knees,
Are slowly eaten, bit by bit.
No wonder Jim detested it!
No wonder that he shouted "Hi!"

The Honest Keeper heard his cry,
Though very fat he almost ran
To help the little gentleman.
"Ponto!" he ordered as he came
(For Ponto was the Lion's name),
"Ponto!" he cried, with angry Frown,
"Let go, Sir! Down, Sir! Put it down!"
The Lion made a sudden stop,
He let the Dainty Morsel drop,
And slunk reluctant to his Cage,
Snarling with Disappointed Rage.
But when he bent him over Jim,
The Honest Keeper's Eyes were dim.
The Lion having reached his Head,
The Miserable Boy was dead!

When Nurse informed his Parents, they
Were more Concerned than I can say:—
His Mother, as She dried her eyes,
Said, "Well—it gives me no surprise,
He would not do as he was told!"
His Father, who was self-controlled,
Bade all the children round attend
To James's miserable end,
And always keep a-hold of Nurse
For fear of finding something worse.

from: *Cautionary Tales for Children*,
by Hilaire Belloc

VERONICA

I think one has to be at least 50 or steeped in Mary Poppins to really appreciate the social setting, but it's a brilliant way of admonishing independent children with an over-active imagination! A modern fable.

LESLEY

A rather gruesome tale about a disobedient child. I suppose it is in the vein of 'Fairy Stories', such as those by the Brothers Grimm, which are dark tales. Why they are considered suitable for young children, I don't know. I'm not sure if children would relish the gruesomeness or be frightened by it.

Interestingly (or maybe not), I had considered sending in 'Albert and the Lion' (aka The Lion and Albert) this week. You may be familiar with it – one of the monologues made famous by Stanley Holloway.

(Ed: I was nearly going to offer Albert and the Lion myself. I opted for Belloc's poem because of that priceless final couplet. Somehow it sums up the situation in the nation today.)

ADELE

Hilaire Belloc - amusing poem and very entertaining.

ROGER

I have always believed in the wisdom of the moral, and I wish politicians would too.

Adele Duffield

My guest poem is by Mary Jean Chan from her 2019 collection, Flèche.

To the Grandmother who Mistook Me for a Boy

I had my fist in your mouth—the day
you nearly died. Minutes into our meal
on Sunday, you slumped over and lay
~so still we thought you'd left us to deal
with the grief you believed we deserved.
To curse our bodies for denying us rare
gifts of sons, despite offerings reserved
for deities weary of yet another prayer.
I wanted you to love me since mother
gave a damn about what you thought
of her; because amongst his brothers,
father was your favorite. So I fought
to keep you from biting your tongue:
my fist in your mouth, your love for me a lie.

VERONICA

I found it quite hard to work out all the relationships and rivalries in this poem, which is full of raw emotion. In my experience any poem written after a significant or shocking event has innate power because it expresses truth that has to come out. Such irony in the last sentence, and the last two lines don't need to rhyme.

LESLEY

I'm not sure how to interpret this poem, Adele. Was the narrator really trying to keep Grandmother from dying, or was the 'fist' an attempt to choke her? Also it is somewhat ambiguous: I thought the fist in the mouth could be a baby's – how could an older child or adult fit their fist in someone's mouth? But a baby, unless you stretch the imagination a lot, could not verbalise the thoughts expressed in the poem. I'm interested to see what others think about it.

ADELE

Mary Jean Chan's poem from this collection is a personal tale of her life and upbringing in China. Dreadful situation over the disappointment of female children.

IAN

Everything I've read of Chinese families reeks of horrifying hatred and violence. Is this what overpopulation does to the family?

According to my reading of the poem, "father" and "mother" are siblings. Surely a mistake! If not, it's just just one more poisonous drop to add to a confused mixture of concentrated poison.

BRIAN PATTEN

Where Are You Now, Batman?

Where are you now, Batman? Now that Aunt Heriot has
reported Robin missing
And Superman's fallen asleep in the sixpenny childhood
seats?
Where are you now that Captain Marvel's SHAZAM! echoes
round the auditorium,
The magicians don't hear it,
Must all be deaf . . . or dead . . .
The Purple Monster who came down from the Purple Planet
disguised as a man
Is wandering aimlessly about the streets
With no way of getting back.
Sir Galahad's been strangled by the Incredible Living Trees,
Zorro killed by his own sword.
Blackhawk has buried the last of his companions
And has now gone off to commit suicide in the disused
Hangars of Innocence.
The Monster and the Ape still fight it out in a room
Where the walls are continually closing;
Rocketman's fuel tanks gave out over London.
Even Flash Gordon's lost, podgy and helpless
He wanders among the stars
Weeping over the robots he loved
Half a universe ago.
My celluloid companions, it's only a few
years
Since first I knew you. Yet something in us has already faded.
Has the Terrible Fiend, That Ghastly Adversary,
Mr Old Age, Caught you in his deadly trap,
And come finally to polish you off,
His machinegun dripping with years . . . ?

VERONICA

Rather sad, this, although I find it hard to relate to, not having seen any of those rather masculine heroes on celluloid or in comics! [An old flame used to sign his letters 'Zorro', and as I'd never even heard of him at the time, this romance died a death too!] A poem evocative of a too-distant boyhood.

ADELE

Brian Patten - didn't know this one but a very witty poem - thanks for sharing Roger.

IAN

Laughed myself silly.

Much the same sentiments occur in the Pixar movie *The Incredibles*. The saddest scene is Mr Incredible, trapped in a cave by arch-villain Syndrome, finding the mummified remains of recognisable superheroes of bygone days. Mr Old Age indeed!

Lesley Pemberton

LIFE

Life, believe, is not a dream
So dark as sages say;
Oft a little morning rain
Foretells a pleasant day.
Sometimes there are clouds of gloom,
But these are transient all;
If the shower will make the roses bloom,
O why lament its fall ?

Rapidly, merrily,
Life's sunny hours flit by,
Gratefully, cheerily,
Enjoy them as they fly!

What though Death at times steps in
And calls our Best away ?
What though sorrow seems to win,
O'er hope, a heavy sway ?
Yet hope again elastic springs,
Unconquered, though she fell;
Still buoyant are her golden wings,
Still strong to bear us well.
Manfully, fearlessly,
The day of trial bear,
For gloriously, victoriously,
Can courage quell despair!

Charlotte Brontë

Written in 1846 under her pen-name of Currer Bell.

VERONICA

A very different poem along similar lines but which chooses hope over regret. The style is obviously of her time, but in her exhortation to see the 'bigger picture' she reveals someone who sees all trials, including aging and death, things to be met with courage rather than fear, hope rather than despair.

LESLEY

I had a bit of a 'crush' on the works of the *Brontës*. Not everything was well-written but some things are considered classic. I thought this poem was apt in our current Covid 19 situation, offering hope through the dark days.

ADELE

Charlotte Bronte - I prefer her as an author personally but this poem is quite engaging.

IAN

It's easy to read this poem as Sunday school morality of the "oh death where is thy sting?" sort. But it reminds me more of the old Russian saying: "the devil is not so terrible (*strashen*) as they paint him" – which means something different from the way it's usually rendered: inviting us to soften our disapproval of the evil one. It means instead that we should not be terrified of the devil, as people say we should, because we (Christians) have an invincible Champion. Less a message of Hope as commonly understood, than Defiance: the deliberate adoption of a little-held viewpoint. And that's what comes through to me, especially the first two lines.

It was self-published jointly by Charlotte, Emily and Anne in 1846, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Bront%C3%AB#Early_years_and_education but I'd say the poem was written some years before, at a time of great personal affliction and loss.

Now for our own poems...



Jonathan Atkinson

Looking Northward

Looking northward, I saw the cathedral
its central tower dwarfing the town,
its detail lost in the distance,
its stones a uniform grey.

Above it, great clouds swirling upwards,
their heads like the peaks of the hills,
their arms like the wings of the eagle,
their flashes the heralds of doom.

The works of mankind may last longer
but the works of the planet are mightier.

Calls

The call to eat is incessant
three or four times every day,
incessant, demanding variety.

It is a part of my nature
and will not go away.

The call to drink is unending
– it surfaces night and day
I continue exhaling liquid.

It is a need of my body
and will not go away.

The desire for sex keeps returning,
my life's work, the genes would say,
the reason I stand here at all.

It is a need of the species
and cannot go away.

Looking Northward

VERONICA

You paint a vivid picture here, Jonathan. The apocalyptic elements wheeling overhead contrast and dwarf even the solid cathedral tower.

SUE

In my mind's eye I see York Minster's square grey tower looming under huge clouds, but you may be seeing some other cathedral. It doesn't matter – the image is both specific and universal, and beautifully evoked. The scene is numinous, so charged with power that it's almost scary... a thrill of wonder that raises the hair on the back of one's neck. And it's full of paradox: the huge stone building, the huger insubstantial cloud, the similarity of transience and eternity. A successful capture of a powerful sight and insight, I think.

ADELE

I can hear you reading this poem - your voice comes through in the words. I'm not sure 'planet' is the right word though. It sounds like a religious poem and then you retreat from God. Is this to gain acceptance from a wider audience I wonder?

ROGER

I like the clever use of 'its' and 'their' to tie the whole thoughtful description together.

IAN

The poem evokes a compelling picture, in both the physical and metaphysical domain.

A cathedral is built to dominate, to browbeat, to assert the might of those who commissioned it. Only nominally does it glorify the creator of the planet. The poem is an invitation to step back and contemplate the cathedral's paltry performance at the latter task.

Calls

VERONICA

Simple truths experienced by all make this more than a personal poem. It says it like it is. But how easy for these things of the natural order to get out of control...

SUE

I'm less sure about this one. Food, drink and sex are all appetites, and the first two are certainly necessary for life. Sexual desire may be a biological given, but it seems to affect different people in very different ways, many of them not geared towards reproduction. And what about sleep, or breathing, or social interaction, which are also necessary for life? So I think this is a well-constructed poem, but I'm not sure I agree that these three necessities are the only necessities, or the most important ones...

ADELE

A bit different but still very you-powerfully put by the narrator and a rather determined voice like he has tried and yet he is defeated by a greater power than his own. I like them both.

ROGER

Interesting and well-constructed.

IAN

Bodily urges. The first two serving the individual organism for its survival, and rarely needing validation. The last demanded by a far higher agency: the whole species, for its survival, yet everywhere challenged, hidden away, and denied. The structure of the poem, with its indomitable chorus, demands comparable recognition for all three.

Veronica Carolan

Skyjacker

To have to clean the car or the windows –
that's one thing.

Gulls have to relieve themselves, after all.
But to relieve me of my Eccles cakes –
that is of a different order entirely.

An uneventful walk, an unscheduled stop
at Bothams; remembering we needed bread,
we stopped and there were pastries chock-full
of currants, black, sticky and inviting.
A treat ready bagged.

Suddenly, shockingly, a rear-guard action –
a silent swoop,
a battery of wings and beak,
and the cakes were gone,
dashed to the ground.

A squadron of seagulls squabbled,
the cellophane shredded
in a frenzy of hunger and determination.
I had found a bargain too good to miss.
The skyjacker had found his target.

11.5.20

LESLEY

Those pesky seagulls. Reminiscent of Adele's account of 'the birds' in Scarborough. I suppose the seagulls are going hungry, no tourists wandering around eating fish and chips, etc., or leaving remnants of food in bins or on the streets. They are now targeting the locals. We all need to be extra careful! Another 'cautionary tale'?

SUE

Yes, I'd heard about the increasing ferocity of gull attacks in Whitby – presumably they are hungry because no tourists to prey on. Once on a mountainside in Wales, I had a bag of prunes skyjacked from my hand by a gull – it was a white paper bag, so I suspect the gull thought it was nabbing fish & chips. "Skyjacker" is a lovely coinage – is it your invention? I wonder what's happened to all the herring gulls that normally live off chips? Herring gulls are a species of conservation concern – amber-listed at least, I think; might even be red-listed – so although I know they are hated by some, I would like them to do well. They were here before we were. But I am sorry you lost your Eccles cakes; you have my particular sympathy here because I'm also an Eccles cake fan. So: a good piece of narrative of a dramatic incident, which has engaged me.

ADELE

Yes, the image in this poem reminds me of my episode in Scarborough although that attack was on someone else. I've so often witnessed this happen in Whitby along the pier and it can be quite frightening. You bring the scene alive here.

ROGER

I thought the changes in pace were very clever. Verse 1 reflective. Verse 2 relaxed. Verse 3 The attack, heightened by the use of short words and alliteration. Verse 4. The last 2 lines are downbeat, as I expect you were, but they do not seem personal to you. The other way to go would be triumphalism for the gulls.

IAN

A shocking scene, likely to recur with increasing frequency as humanity destroys habitats quicker than populations can downsize naturally. But it has provided the inspiration for a worthy and memorable poem.

Do I detect passing homage to *The Rape of the Lock*?

Ian Clark

Demi

You sparkle like a waterfall in sunlight
Your silky voice a whisper in the dark
Your mannerisms strike me OTT
Demi – are you for real?

Is this an act you're fond of putting on?
Film star, or princess, do you try to be?
Wildlife narrator, TV hostess
Demi – are you for real?

I can't detect a mask upon your features
No foundation, lipstick, eye-shadow
Jewel upon your nostril, but no make-up
Demi – are you for real?

Saturday, I glimpsed you in the garden
talking with the staff of stressful things
the smile, the sparkle, gone, though face unaltered
Demi – are you for real?

Your soul's your own, and you confess to no one
You look to nobody for love and care
You've carved and gilded granite towers of grief
Demi – you *are* for real!

VERONICA

Is this Demi Moore or an archetypal demi-goddess of screen and stage? Or just a human person able to present herself with poise and equanimity in every situation? Indeed - is she "for real"? She has convinced you!

LESLEY

I can't comment on this except to ask who is Demi? It was difficult me to interpret what was going on.

SUE

I'm assuming Demi is a Famous Person who would, if I were a normal person, be gracing my TV every night? (I am the weirdo who doesn't own a TV.) And that you ask if her public persona is a mask or an illusion, and decide that it isn't, because you've seen her not fall to bits under pressure?

ADELE

I like the repetition of the last line here in each stanza with a final twist which matches the realisation of your narrator. I don't fully understand the poem but its build up is impressive nonetheless.

ROGER

Is this Ian doing what I do, watching a fascinating woman on TV and trying to piece together her world and the persona behind the screen image? The last two verses confused me and yet I see the enigma has become reality.

IAN

No it's not Demi Moore, nor is it Demi Lovato. No Sue, I don't own a TV either. So that's two weirdos in this group. It's well above the national average.

And I (belatedly) agree with Lesley. What's the use of a character sketch if you don't have any idea who I mean? But there again, you just might. Particularly if you patronise the White House. (...pub, not official residence).

Clearly I missed the boat with this one. Next VPG, in atonement, I shall write a *proper* poem about trees and flowers. Which scans *and* rhymes.

Adele Duffield

Daily Comfort Guaranteed

Leant up against the bedroom wall,
legs evenly spread and my back upright,
I see you approach, look longingly at my fine
carved limbs, worked and turned with careful
experience by an older man before you.
He caressed my frame with sumptuous velvets
filled me up with the finest of his loving touch, like no other.
He made me feel sublime, his fingers stroking every curve
and mound between each cheeky tweak of my buttons,
the sweat building on his brow, watching as I was nurtured,
building into a fine form of statuesque beauty to be
admired, coveted. But it was you, you who got me.
When you first set eyes on my design, you had to have me,
insisted, paid a high price for me, your daily pleasure,
and how I have served you since. I tingled
in excitement at our first union, when I felt
your strong buttocks on top of me, your legs
astride mine easing your way into perfect position
and a satisfied sigh assured me of your desire.
I can still hold myself rigid, keep firm of form,
though the scars of your scratches I no longer hide.
My age showing through, now faded and worn,
I still display a certain elegant demeanor, would hate
to disappoint and find myself one day discarded,
gathering dust, staring from the antique shop window
looking out for a new, or an old, admirer.

ADELE

I hope everyone realises that I am a chair!

VERONICA

A very sexy chair just waiting to be upholstered. Satisfying indeed - you will never grow old!

LESLEY

Ah yes! I think I got it this time (after the faux pas with 'Ted'). This is a **chair** 'speaking'.

An imaginative take of an inanimate object having feelings.

SUE

Ahrgh, I'll never sit on a chair ever again! I had no idea that chairs were sex objects! Yuk! I assume this was inspired by Roger's "Teddy bear as abused person" poem – and perhaps we should give objects more attention

and dignity, and generally treat them with more kindness and consideration. But ew, this chair embarrasses me. (That's me; embarrassed by a fictional chair.) This poem is sensually, revoltingly good!

ROGER

Very very clever and so sensual. I find it the most wonderful description of a piece of furniture I have met. I don't think I shall look at a chair in the same way after this.

IAN

An entertaining, playful, thought-provoking riddle. Yes, I realised it was a chair... eventually.

I did wonder at first if it was the poet's CV, seeking a new position in life. Do you suppose it might be a metaphor?

Roger Gould

Peace is positively negative

If Peace is the delivery of a perfect new-born
then
after the surge of love towards it
there is an absence of
medical discomfort the fear that preceded its arrival.

If Peace is the cessation of war
then
after the relief at the survival of self family friends
there is an absence of
violence murderous intent broken nights nagging worry.

If Peace is the contemplation of beauty
then
after the wonder enjoyment pleasure
there is an absence of
clamour criticism cost-effective solutions the desecration of nature.

If Peace is the one you love
then
after the determination to share life eternally
there is an absence of
distrust morality material judgement heed for others' opinions.

How odd that Peace conflicts so much.

Roger J Gould
14.6.2020

VERONICA

The lay-out of the poem works well, highlighting the contrast between positive and negative. A very interesting meditation. Your last line is in itself an invitation to further reflection.

SUE

Um. I need to go away and think about this – effective poem, which has challenged me to examine my unexamined assumptions... this may take some time...

ADELE

I really like the use of white space here forcing us to read and interpret the words in a certain contemplative way. It works for me. Your contradictory title works well by setting the scene of that questioning in the mind before you begin reading the poem. I really think this is interesting and requires a reread and then still leaves you pondering the point. Well done Roger.

IAN

This is a well-designed, well-built ship to float an idea I can't properly get a handle on. I can't fault the ship so I'll turn on the idea, defining Peace.

Some ideas can best be defined as the absence of qualities which militate against the idea. A biologist put it to me once that *Reptilia* is a difficult class to study because essentially it's any land animal which is not a mammal or a bird. A simpler example: how do you make a strong chain? Answer: by making sure there is no weak link. The poem's title encapsulates the matter.

Lesley Pemberton

My guest poem this week was by Charlotte Bronte, so I am sending one of my own poems entitled 'Bronte', written C.1970s.

BRONTË

Young woman of the moorland
Grey dress to match grey skies
Young woman of the poor land
I share now with your sighs

Fleet-footed bring unto me
The wings of time unknown
And bravely impart to me
The wonder you have shown

Inspired by the bleak hills
And Yorkshire homes of stone
They your thoughts did instil
For this place was your home

Not just a home to live in
But life and heart and soul
The words that came to birth in
Your mind reflect the whole

If I could know a small part
Of what enlightened you
I'd fulfil the dreams of my heart
To express what I feel too.

VERONICA

A fitting follow-up to your chosen poem, one written by a young woman who finds an affinity with the Bronte of the moors. It reflects her simplicity in a style of the period with the awareness that her inspiration came from her surroundings. In it you express the wish of all poets, perhaps - to connect with one's muse.

ADELE

I think this is a well written poem from your younger days aspiring to be a writer. You do have a lovely way with words that shows through in your poems as well as your fiction writing. Have you ever tried writing poetry that doesn't rhyme? I sometimes wonder if we are too constrained by rhyme and meter. It would be interesting to see what you might produce without it.

ROGER

Your plea for insight, to the writer who clearly inspires you, is well done. One line jars: 'They your thoughts did instil.' I know you have done it to maintain the integrity of the rhyme scheme but, to me, it rings false. I wonder if you need the last verse; your message is already there.

IAN

I still like to see a poem that rhymes and scans. To me it's the equivalent to not wanting your child to be seen in public without its face washed and its hair combed.