

The Virtual Poetry Group

led by Ian Clark, Thursday 30 July 2020
UPDATED WITH COMMENTS: Tuesday 4 August 2020

Present:

Veronica Carolan
Ian Clark
Adele Duffield
Lesley Pemberton

Welcome to our fourth Virtual Poetry Group of the lockdown, which “met” on Thursday 30 July.

Please comment on each poem and send your comments to me, by Monday night, 3 Aug.
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_30_JUL_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_30_JUL_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

To Carry the Child

by Stevie Smith

To carry the child into adult life
Is good? I say it is not,
To carry the child into adult life
Is to be handicapped.

The child in adult life is defenceless
And if he is grown-up, knows it,
And the grown-up looks at the childish part
And despises it.

The child, too, despises the clever grown-up,
The man-of-the-world, the frozen,
For the child has the tears alive on his cheek
And the man has none of them.

As the child has colours, and the man sees no
Colours or anything,
Being easy only in things of the mind,
The child is easy in feeling.

Easy in feeling, easily excessive
And in excess powerful,
For instance, if you do not speak to the child
He will make trouble.

You would say a man had the upper hand
Of the child, if a child survive,
I say the child has fingers of strength
To strangle the man alive.

Oh it is not happy, it is never happy,
To carry the child into adulthood,
Let children lie down before full growth
And die in their infancy
And be guilty of no man's blood.

But oh the poor child, the poor child, what can he do,
Trapped in a grown-up carapace,
But peer outside of his prison room
With the eye of an anarchist?

VERONICA

I didn't know this poem even though I have a copy of *The Rattle Bag* (ed. Heaney and Hughes) but came across it through looking for a poem to send this week. I would be interested to hear other people's reactions to this, and also in relation to my own poem which I wrote a week earlier. The first two lines seem to me to be a response to something a therapist might say: befriending the inner child, perhaps. However, Stevie Smith's poem takes the most negative aspects of childhood and adulthood. I find it a dark poem written from experience. She uses repetition to good effect.

IAN

We've all met people most charitably described as overgrown children. They do not function well as fathers, mothers, teachers, managers, and it is ruinous to trust them with a responsible post. The poem acutely observes the condition. I'm sure the poet had an actual individual in mind.

Primitive peoples like the Masai preserve the traditional wisdom that recognises how destructive overgrown children are. They knock boys' front teeth out in a coming-of-age ritual, to publicly demonstrate the attainment of a basic maturity, and to symbolise pointedly that adulthood entails the loss of your milk teeth. You have to wonder if the people who've been wilfully promoted to high office in recent years for their anarchistic propensities would pass this wise old test. It should be the climax of the swearing-in ceremony of every head of state.

ADELE

I think this is a very powerful poem with a strong message and, whilst I agree largely with her, it is a very sad poem for those 'children' caught in the trap. I think it is very representative of current generations of parenting wanting too much for their children and, sadly, has had a more adverse effect on them as a result. Very thought provoking.

LESLEY

I am not sure what to make of this poem but I think it may be about one's 'inner child' and a clash between keeping it alive or suppressing it as one moves into adulthood. I couldn't find any helpful analyses and one was rubbish - it referred to the author as 'he', to start with! Although I haven't read much of Stevie Smith's work I did know that she is female.

The poem partly rhymes in a few places, or has near-rhyming. It reads somewhat raggedly to me.

Ian Clark

True Enough

His aging nature is the same
As when childhood wore his name
In an atmosphere of love
And to itself appeared enough:
Only now when he has come
In walking distance of his tomb,
He at last discovers who
He had always been to whom
He so often was untrue.

W H Auden

VERONICA

Did you choose this poem after reading the Stevie Smith, Ian? If not, there is synchronicity at work. This is an unprepossessing poem - I couldn't find it on-line - which could only be written by someone in later years. Striving in the early years (to earn love? respect?) can take a person away from his/her essential nature. The metre is irregular, which somehow makes the reader pay more attention to the meaning and not just the rhyme.

IAN

I keep a little stock of poems to trot out on occasions like this. I copied out this one a few weeks ago, when I was revisiting Auden. It seemed to fit my mood, so out it came. I think the similarities with Stevie Smith begin and end with the tristesse of contemplating childhood passing into maturity (...or not, as the case may be).

Veronica calls the poem "unprepossessing". But I think it's as neatly constructed as a wristwatch. It starts off four-square as a pair of four-footed rhyming couplets (standing for conventional relationships), then dissolves into an odd number of lines with a rhyming scheme also describable as "odd". This aptly symbolises the ambiguities of the poet's life, which began so contentedly.

"Walking distance of his tomb" well-denotes the feeling of advancing age. Death becomes a formal visitor waiting patiently for you in the front parlour while you fuss around in the kitchen with whatever you think so important to get finished.

ADELE

Strangely, this poem appears to begin where Stevie Smith's topic left us, but it is also quite different. There is a sense of personal regret here from the protagonist himself, whereas Stevie's was from the perspective of an observer to parenting. I do like Auden and this is not disappointing.

LESLEY

In a similar vein to the poem sent in by Veronica but I found this short, simplistic verse more appealing.

Adele Duffield

Warming Her Pearls

*by Carol Ann Duffy
for Judith Radstone*

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her
in my attic bed; picture her dancing
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
watch the soft blush seep through her skin
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see
her every movement in my head.... Undressing,
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

she always does... And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn.

ADELE

I think this poem is so heartfelt and moving about the sadness of a love that cannot be declared. You really feel the emptiness and pain.

VERONICA

There is frank sexuality in this poem that Adele chose, and a feeling of uncertainty as to whether this is a lady's maid or a female lover or both. Maybe this is intentional, but the period she describes through the use of language, eg 'bids me wear them,' 'silk or taffeta', attic bed, 'her carriage', makes me think that this is a maid in service in a big house - 18th century or Victorian? The lady in question would probably have a husband or

gentlemen friends in public, whereas the servant is very aware of her physical reaction to the absence of both the lady and the pearls. Does the lady know of this infatuation? I love 'I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot, watch the soft blush seep through her skin'. So sensual, the simple statement revealing a world of feeling. I wonder whether the comma after 'tall men' should be there? Who is it that is puzzled by the maid's lingering scent? Duffy is another poet I have yet to explore.

IAN

Adele's delicious choice has sent me researching Carol Ann Duffy. Her Wikipedia article finishes with "openly lesbian". The operative word for me is "openly".

I know people who warm the toilet seat for each other – people who wouldn't dream of bolder displays of intimacy. Carol Ann Duffy is in the tradition of Sappho of Lesbos: not someone flaunting their dirty habits, as ignorant later generations would have it, but an occupational entertainer, professional to the core, with a penchant for topics of widespread resonance which her peers see fit to shun.

The gossiping classes condemn themselves out of their own mouths with their cut-and-dried parcelling-up into categories like "straight" and "lesbian". Surely interpersonal relationships, in the general sense, are a spice-rack of possibilities, some of which might occasionally dominate (like fenugreek in old-fashioned curry) but others merely tried for effect, or applied routinely in minute doses?

What does come across loud and clear is Duffy's painful memory of her Gorbals past. A lady rewards her body-servant with a homely treat disguised as a duty: wear her pearls to warm them up. It's like bringing home party tidbits for the children. This overwhelms the maid, but I sense she is less preoccupied with her employer's blushing shoulders than with the slummy body odour she must be leaving on the pearls, to "puzzle" (disgust) her lady's dancing partner. Only gossips would speculate that the women are a hiccup away from "slipping naked into bed", the rabbit's foot abandoned on the dresser.

LESLEY

Unrequited love (lust?) of a maid for her mistress? This is what some analysts of the poem say. I also read it as the narrator imagining a better life for herself, where she is 'mistress'.

Lesley Pemberton

I love to see the summer beaming forth

I love to see the summer beaming forth
And white wool sack clouds sailing to the north
I love to see the wild flowers come again
And mare blobs stain with gold the meadow drain
And water lilies whiten on the floods
Where reed clumps rustle like a wind shook wood
Where from her hiding place the Moor Hen pushes
And seeks her flag nest floating in bull rushes
I like the willow leaning half way o'er
The clear deep lake to stand upon its shore
I love the hay grass when the flower head swings
To summer winds and insects happy wings
That sport about the meadow the bright day
And see bright beetles in the clear lake play

John Clare (1793-1864)

VERONICA

It's good to be reminded of John Clare's straightforward poetry which is so evocative. Despite being the same length and the same rhyme scheme as the poem offered by Ian, the contrast describes worlds literally centuries apart. Clare is a master of mindfulness so that with economy of words he describes a country meadow leading down to the 'blobs' beside the lake. Are these king-cups (marsh marigolds)? One can almost smell the hay grass and hear the insects.

ADELE

I do like the 'white wool sack clouds' which stands out to me pleasantly in a poem that is otherwise a little too trite and icky, particularly the last two lines which just seem forced. From our older poets, I much prefer the metaphysical poets who played with form and used science as a metaphor for their loves and desires. Sorry

Lesley 🍷

LESLEY

I came across this short poem whilst 'surfing the internet' and it appealed to me because it is about summer. Simple observations but expressed in an exquisite way.

Apparently the author did not put any full stops in his poems, even at the end. That may make it seem that the poem is cut short and perhaps should continue?

I wasn't sure of the reference to 'mare blobs stain with gold the meadow drain'. Having looked it up, 'mare blobs' was a term for kingcups or marsh marigolds.

IAN

Nature poetry from a lost world – still with the power to evoke. But I suspect the poet saw a vastly different landscape than the one that confronts us today.

Now for our own poems...



Veronica Carolan

Perception

Perception
is nine-tenths of the sore
uncovered by the thoughts
that tear
the fabric of a wounded mind.
Perception
takes a word and makes it more
than passing comment ought
to bear,
received, not meant, as being unkind.
Perception
has the power to reach the core
of what the heart distorts.
Unfair
to add the past to what we find.
Perception
needs desire to set the score
at one again, enwrought
to dare
to let forgiveness' power unbind.

23.7.20

ADELE

I was very taken by your first line - which appears to be a play on 'possession is nine tenths of the law' - well done on that! I think the poem is both clever and thought provoking, until the very last 'perception' from where I feel it goes astray somehow - perhaps trying to keep to the constraints of the style. From 'enwrought' it is not easy on the tongue and I do not fully understand what you are trying to say. Why does perception need desire to set the score at one? The rest of it (above that) however works for me totally so I think you've done a good job.

LESLEY

Sorry, Veronica, but I'm having difficulty unravelling your poem. Unfortunately I'm a bit short of time in doing the comments and I think I would need to re-read it several times and ponder on its intended message.

IAN

There is something Renaissance / Metaphysical about this poem. Would you call it a homage to John Donne? Courtly language is used to analyse something as everyday as the hurt caused by a careless word, and an appeal to mindfulness to avoid that sort of thing. Perception is perhaps the correct word here, not Mindfulness.

Ian Clark

The View from Naples, Florida

We live in a world that is cosy and stable.
Let's keep it all just as it is, if we're able.

These bright sunny days: what a shame if they stop
when life is so good for those at the top.

Let the good things in life be hogged by the wealthy
if never quite ample to keep us all healthy.

How comfy to know we're the pick of the bunch
the biggest big pigs who deserve our free lunch.

We owe our position to hard work – and more
not merely to chance, and the luck of the draw.

The kids who weren't dealt the same hand as you
are not worth the effort from our point of view.

We're the product of everything privilege breeds...
Who else to proclaim what America needs?

VERONICA

A campaign speech? The irony drips through the clever doggerel to make the point. Coincidentally we caught the animated version of Animal Farm after lunch today. I hate to mention the Stevie Smith poem again in this context, but if the cap fits..... However, from a global viewpoint, we are not far off the top, I fear.

ADELE

I can hear your voice all the way through this. You apply a sharp wit and irony to a section of society that has very little appeal and often leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Particularly under the current people of power in America! You capture this beautifully and leave the reader almost wanting to spit after saying the words(which I don't approve of generally 😏).

LESLEY

Your rhyming-couplet sonnet structured poem seems to 'advocate' that what is non-pc for those less privileged is perfectly acceptable for 'those at the top'. I think probably you don't advocate this view, it is somewhat tongue in cheek? It can also be applied to the UK and other divided wealthy/poor nations.

IAN

Naples, Florida is a small, quiet, smug beachside community of comfortably-off people, situated halfway up the sheltered Gulf side of the Florida peninsula. I spent a week there at my firm's annual conference. It was November, and the weather was like a balmy English summer. I wrote this a year or two later in response to an article about what America needs by a Naples resident. America is now in the loving care of people like that.

Adele Duffield

The Human Silence

Humanity locked away, capsuled in silence
to the outside world, giving unknowingly
freedom of speech to others, previously
unheard the right to roam
unhindered as a
re-claimed habitat unfurls.
Freedom to fly without fear —
freedom to scream from the rooftops —
proud to re-occupy spaces; native species
pushed out of sight by human intervention.

So suddenly, this calm came down on the outside world
Mankind's street-life switched off to the natural world

No engine hum, no noisy clamour, no air
contaminated by hum drum inane chatter
all about what really doesn't matter.
Instead, clear airwaves carry
the busying calls of birdsong.
The daring venture closer in,
re-wilding spaces usually overrun,
returning us to nature for a short Season.
Just enough time for Man to see reason?

VERONICA

Different from your journal, I see this as the fruit of contemplation on the positive environmental effect of Lockdown. The first verse is nicely ambiguous - perhaps it could be deemed anthropomorphic - as it isn't until the penultimate line of the verse that we realise you are talking of species other than human. I like 'mankind's street-life switched off to the natural world'. You ask the fundamental question of humanity's response.

LESLEY

I assume you have written this in the light of our lockdown/restricted lives over recent months. This has given 'nature' a chance to re-assert itself whilst people have been out of the way. Sadly we may not see reason - witness the reports of those visiting 'beauty spots' and coastal areas who have left behind litter and detritus without thought of who will clean up and what negative effects it has on the natural world.

IAN

Reminds me of how I grieved to see the familiar busy world reduced to silence. But now the noise and bustle has returned with a vengeance, I find myself grieving for the glorious peace and quiet that oh-so-briefly let a natural world peep through and slowly dare to reassert itself.

Lesley Pemberton

VALENTINE

originally written 2007; amended several times

Valentine, you lie in warmer climes
Antipodean earth covers you
The great adventure, the new beginning,
Were cut short
The tumour in your brain
Took your life away

Your wife and two young children
Had sailed for many weeks
To be with you
Dreams of a new life in a new world
Were rudely broken
Your family returned, unable to face
The challenges of an emerging colony alone

Valentine, your given name,
My great-grandfather
You are a world away.

Valentine, you lie in colder climes
Your ashes scattered on the moor
The lifelong love, commitment, promise,
Were cut short
The unexpected death
That left me to grieve

Your wife has loved and lost you
Expecting more years
To be with you
Dreams of a lifetime being together
Were cruelly broken
I brought you back to your favourite place
To the hills and dales where I picture your face

Valentine, you are nearby,
My loving husband,
And yet a world away

VERONICA

This is powerful poem, Lesley, all the more so for being written from personal experience and that of your family. The theme is of love and hope being cut short by fatal illness, and of the separation not only of continents but of worlds in the aftermath of bereavement. There is nothing forced about this poem, and its stark narrative takes the reader on the journey.

ADELE

A poem of two halves and your repetition of the style and the similar wording to capture the feeling of both lost loves is juxtaposed beautifully. On my first reading I was confused by the voices because both lost loves are called Valentine so I tried to read it as two different times but for the same person. Do they need to have the same name to make it work for you? I wonder if it might clarify the comparison and improve the reading if the names were different.

LESLEY

This was inspired originally by a competition in a writing magazine for a Valentine's Day poem. I wanted to approach the theme differently to the usual romantic notions. However I didn't complete it at the time and have revisited it on a number of occasions. Still I don't feel it is 'right' and needs further work.

The poem is in two parts - which perhaps did not come across clearly in the version that was sent out. (No detriment to Ian; sometimes the reformatted edition makes unintended changes.)

The first part is about my great-grandfather who was named Valentine Scott. He went out to Australia in the early 1900s, to make a new life for himself and his wife and two young children.

Sadly he became ill with a brain tumour and died and was buried in a cemetery in what is now the outskirts of Sydney. This is becoming a story in itself so perhaps I should stop this part here.

The second part is about my own 'Valentine', my husband Alan, who died at the age of 48 almost 21 years ago.

IAN

As sent to me, this poem had a firm line drawn across the page to separate the two parts. Thinking it was an artifact of copy/paste, I omitted it. I am sorry about that: it is essential. First off, I read the poem as referring to the same "Valentine", and wondered at the contradictions. Later I realised my blunder. I have reinserted a separator. A heavy line across looks ugly: I'd use an arabesque if I were typesetting it for a book.

This is a fitting tribute to the two Valentines. What a sad story of hopes cut short. Lesley must stop touching it up some time, and what better place to stop than here. The poem is perfect, in the achievement sense of the word. It needs for nothing (...except that separator).