

WILLIBRORD
SHEET
POETRY
PAMPHLET

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INTRODUCTION

POETRY AND BIRD FLIGHT

I've been running further education courses online during lockdown. My favourite is called 'Poetry for Pleasure' - an hour-long Zoom gathering on a Wednesday afternoon to casually discuss whichever poet or particular poem we fancy with seven to eight attendees. *Casually*, by the way, means no bashing out dactyls against a table top, or asking class-members to skewer out all the participles; no justifying how poetry might get you a job, or trying to feed a blunt-needle of an exam question through the poem's guts - "How does the poet portray feeling in this poem?"). *Casually* means I ask "so, what was your response to this poem?" and then sit back and listen, occasionally answering a question about the poet, clarifying a word, picking up on someone's enthusiasm for this line or that line, wondering openly about different ways you could read the final stanza. Teaching poetry can get you into bad habits: finding answers, looking up criticism and biographies and lesson-plans

something potentially awkward with language and poetic form, things unusual and unexpected. In that first line, look how long it takes him to get from the subject to the main verb “suffer”, putting all the weight of the sentence on these *things* (whatever they are). Look how often he uses a hyphen, as if he is trying to pull words together, to overlay meaning on meaning, to show some far more profound definition of this thing than a simple noun could offer. “Broad-pinioned”, for instance, ties together noun (*pinion*), adjective (*broad*) and verb (*-ed*) to create a kind of super-adjective meaning ‘having broad wings’. As a one-off this might appear in any poem, but Jones does it constantly. It flavours his whole use of language. Nouns are constantly becoming verbs: ‘slimed’, ‘un-winged’, ‘whiskered’. Look here how Jones doesn’t just describe a ‘metamorphosis’ but has it happen to the language itself, transforming right before our eyes, the familiar becoming familiar-enough to recognise but unfamiliar-enough to feel unusual and strange.

One more observation: in this passage, John Ball is thinking of the birds of prey - eagles and kites and other ancient signs of nobility - that used to share the battlefield with soldiers in centuries past, and imagines the rats around him as a kind of regressive evolution of these birds - “the speckled kite of Maldon/ and the crow/ have naturally selected to be un-winged;/ to go on the belly”. His language follows their logic, from a kind of poetic grandeur (with clear references to, and words

taken straight out of, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, and other Victorian/ Georgian poets) to the letters that form creaturely sounds ‘sap’ and ‘scut’. Reading this, it feels like Jones is teaching us how to read again, to lay aside expectations of what poetry does or how it works and learn a new language, one that comes out of the trenches - the other side of that rubicon of the First World War - and now has to learn how to ‘be un-winged’ and ‘go on the belly’.

*

Finding Jones in 2014 was like learning a new language. It had all the thrill of decryption. This year, the language I thought I knew well took a new turn in the poet Stevie Smith. She is most well-known for her poem ‘Not Waving But Drowning’:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he’s dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

This is not the strangest of Smith's poems, but even here you feel her peculiarity as a poet. Take these lines: "Poor chap, he always loved larking,/ And now he's dead". It's the tone of voice, the middle-class suburban 'chat', wrapping like elaborate brocatelles and fine chiffons around an object of immeasurable sadness. Perhaps the reason not more of Smith's poems are known is because they are so incredibly weird that people don't know what to make of them. They are not in any sense obviously 'good' poems (she doesn't offer lilting lyrical phrases, writes with purposefully awkward scansion and frequently 'messes up' the rhyme). What gripped me then and still has me in its clutches is the way she finds a new, utterly idiosyncratic mode for meaning-making. Smith listened closely to the way people around her spoke - the school-mistresses and her old aunt and the lingering late-Victorians perching awkwardly on the back of a new era and her suburban neighbours and the bourgeois literary party-goers - and perhaps listened even more closely to what wasn't being said: she took that as her fabric for crafting poems which simultaneously hide and expose all that was raw and difficult about life. Her poems have the impact of someone at a WI tearoom opening-ceremony who has just politely pointed out to the present company that there is a dead body under the cake table.

Though wholly unlike in their approach to poetry, Jones and Smith rise together in my mind as kindred spirits for this shared quality: both are not just poets but

discoverers of a new kind of material. For Jones, fitting together nouns and adjectives and verbs into new and strange combinations creates a material for depicting a world thoroughly entwined: the physical bound always to history and memory and the sacred. He wants to find a way to present again in the form of the words the reality of life as something sacramental: take, for instance, his definition of human beings as "dung-making Holy-Ghost-temples".

Smith, on the other hand, finds her material of choice in something much more embedded in habits of speech. She works with masks and superficiality. Her material is your expectations. Just when you think she's using language one way - consider what the word 'drowning' initially conjures in the first stanza above - you discover she's doing something quite different - look again at that word in the final stanza. Words belie our intended usage of them, and they reveal us in spite of ourselves. Phrases that embody the left-over attitudes of Victorian England - "chap" "larking" "Mother" - become her sharp-edged chisel for exposing the darker realities of life and, more significantly for Smith, death.

*

This is the thrill of bird-watching. Any bird-watcher will appreciate the delight that can come over and over again from being attentive to that flutter-flight peculiar to starlings, or the swoop of swifts or a kestrel 'rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing', as Hopkins puts it.

All the more terrific when some utterly strange kind of motion wends its way into your vision. More than simply the thrill of originality, though, there arises in this an opportunity to learn again the language you thought you knew, to let your own thinking be led out by the imagination, and to discover afresh this very curious phenomenon of language which so shapes the distinctiveness of what it is to be human. To allow our familiar language to be interrupted in this way undeniably requires a certain faith, to be drawn out into something new. As Rowan Williams puts it in *The Edge of Words*, it is ‘an act of faith which assumes that words can be persuaded to say more than they initially seem to mean’.¹

It is hard to resist the pull to insert some neat theological tie-up here, because the relationship between poetry and faith is tantalizing, not to say ancient and conspicuous, but also difficult to frame and deserves careful thinking. In part because of this, I invited, over lock-down, a few friends to have this conversation, with the caveat that it would be filmed for the purpose of accompanying this pamphlet. In the first of these, theologian Carmody Grey introduces her reflections with the first line of DH Lawrence’s ‘Song of a Man who has Come Through’, “Not I, not I but the wind that blows through me”:

That captures to me something that poetry does

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, (Bloomsbury: London, 2014), 146

for me: it relativises my sense of self. It kind of reintroduces me to reality being so infinitely much more and greater than me in a way that feels intrinsically redemptive And actually I often think - and I think I’ve learnt this from poetry in part - that that’s what redemption is, is realising that your reality isn’t the only reality.²

To lean a little on that word ‘*relativise*’, poetry uncovers a truth about language, (with undeniable theological significance,) that at the fundamental level of our own meaning-making we are always in a *relation* of dependence. We know that we adopt habits of speech from the people around us and this might seem a fairly ordinary observation, but when Stevie Smith, for example, takes some little familiar phrase we all share on a day-to-day basis and finds within it potential to say something immeasurably further-reaching about who we are, we can become conscious of that dependence in an utterly transformative way.

Later on in *The Edge of Words*, Rowan Williams observes that the ‘simplest poetic forms have the same purpose at their heart – the complicating of what seems normal in order to uncover what ‘normal’ perception screens out.’³ This pamphlet contains within it all those treasures, ‘the dull things of the day,’ to steal Don

² Carmody Grey, *Willibrord Conversations on Poetry & Faith*: Carmody Grey, available at: <https://youtu.be/brPHYBoBo24> (Accessed: 23rd October, 2020)

³ Williams, *Edge of Words*, 133

Paterson's image, in which someone has seen 'some possibility', and has furrowed their familiar language for ways to frame it afresh. Jack Nouch's first poem, for instance, turns the simple gesture of a husband combing his wife's hair into a moment rich with a tender, sacramental significance. In Rosa Lewis's poem 'Ember Day (14.09.20)', she begins with an ancient ammonite fossil, and arrestingly expands this familiar image into what has the feel of a response to Yeats' 'turning and turning in the widening gyre': lines stretching and twisting across the expanse of time and the page, interrupted by Mary's *fiat* to reveal something inexplicably new in the pattern of history. Fiona Cantatto's poem 'The Lord Appears to Fiona' sings with her distinctive Glaswegian, effusive, startlingly frank, beaming voice. It couldn't have been written by anyone else. This is to reflect on a few of the contributors here, but it also somehow captures something of what the Willibrord Fellowship has come to be about for many of us. More than just a sharing of voices, it's a learning to have faith in the language of others and a willingness to let that shape, change, unveil things in ourselves. When the meaning-making of someone else's own mind is peculiar and unfamiliar, this kind of reaching for communion puts that 'act of faith' in the language of others into practise, and, hopefully, makes a habit of *relativising* our sense of self.

ON JOY AND HOW TO EAT IT

It's so easy to draw the blinds and say you're windowless,
to be a clenching jaw, to say *joy doesn't resonate
the way deep groans do*. Some of us are prone
to being so dang miserable all the time, so bent
on being melancholic and serious, to fold ourselves
into the bent bar of the padlock on the gates we keep

we forget the most beautiful thing
about this is how we open,
like a fresh Muji, or the first big book you read
as a yout that flings your brain so wide
that the doors bounce off their frames and crack
the walls to bits, letting so many living things rush
in and out, a *damn* bursting from you.

You know them ones
that rattle the hinges of heaven a bit?
Or like other things that open: curtains and the day, your love
on a free afternoon, or your boy's baby's eyes to the sky
and the pine above you both, a toddler's whole face
at Communion, like a baby eagle feeding
from the mouth of God.

Gabriel Akamo

THE GROOM

He brushed her hair each night.
He folded the tresses like flour
And crumbled the worn knots
Into simple and smooth strands.

His long repeated strokes,
In silence or calm counsel,
Soft as a praying voice,
Timed their rhythmic compline.

Sometimes the cares rang out,
The peals of a distressed mind;
Still, his hand and ear
Heard out, replied, and chimed.

Or sometimes, to know by hand,
And feel mutual sympathy,
His fingers spread and stole
Among her willing secrets.

From time to time she felt
His pull too tight or loose,
And put her palm on his
Behind her head to guide.

When the day's joy flooded
Into evening, they laughed and played,
And he would run a finger
Through the stream of her hair.

It was his boyish desire
Become her husband's promise,
To do each last labour:
To care by comb and touch.

Jack Nouch



FOUNDLING

There, on the step, he's sitting,
like the smallest prince,
lifting each pebble with an order,
pink and precise in dexterous paws.
His lips mutter, according to his office,
half-words, like whispering;
they sound the shape of strange things
laid linearly before him.

This small poet squats on chubby haunches,
finding the world peculiar, and
bending it to his lips as if to
kiss it
or taste it,
places it where he can feel it most.

I can see the summer light spread
over his ears and gild
curls of gorgeous hay-like hair.
The door's shadow shifts to the bridge
of his nose, to dull his blossoming cheeks.

He doesn't notice me
among the lost things of the wider world.

I watch him through the day
wording empty spaces,
and find him finding names
for all his broken pieces
in evening's oblivion.

Kate Banks

MY BROTHER

My brother is an open tuned listlessness
plucked carefully
across the strings of mum's old red Martin.

He is a kind word spoken
into an ever-present chaos and stress,
a placating presence, a low frequency sound wave.

He is unsure how to address
the wildness of the world,
except to sing a melody over it.

He is a quiet thought
a secret I might know
if I could close the four years of distance between us.

My brother is a martin hiding,
swallowed by the overhang of roofs,
like the ones flitting to and fro at our school –

do you remember them, brother?
Living in that dark space that sits
between the house and the world?

He flies out and in, out and in.
My brother likes the smallness of the house
but he always has one wing poking out

into the vastness of the world.

Rosie Milne



THE LORD APPEARS TO FIONA

I asked for a vision and I got the Burning Bush. I mean,
I was rush past my parents room and WOW
transfixed by the top of a tree in the windOW I cannot
tell you what it was like:

yellow
caught in the slow fire of autumn & transfiguraous bright light.
All I can say is
I had to go into the room

to meet with every kind of golden
moving
like the scales of a school of some mating fish.
You couldn't take it all
in the whole had a million parts and every part
became the whole part of the whole.

The only way I can describe the leaves is to say they were
the gaps in-between the leaves in which the Sun articulates
His flabbergasting physical hieroglyphic in which the Wind Wholly
facilitates the fluency of His bright analogical fiction.

You can't imagine the effect it had on me:
it was my little flying boy
with a shock of blonde
haloing two blue sky's

I could not tell: it was the burning bush of Moses.
although it held me
it did not speak or I could not hear it.

But what was there to say?

Next time,
I'll ask for a vision with some damn advice.

Fiona Contatto



MURMURATIONS

It is like she has discovered the moon.
Waves in the sky descend and dive. Air fish
– speckled shoals of dappled dark
as husky morning stirs on the marsh.
Each, a note in a phrase, all swell
as one, plummet
and rise again. – and the noise! More than wind
rushing through pines – more than waves
crashing to shore. Their myriad
of wings whistle and whir
the scent of silence to stirring storm.

Then, the murmur
fades to grey,
light mist across the marshlands.

Morning is broken, the silence un-frozen. As we trudge back
to shadowy cars, our chatter overrides the song of birds.

Antonia Weir

A MOTHER AND DAUGHTER IN CHURCH

The daughter's head she has chosen to rest,
But whether her mother's breast, shoulder, lap,
Remains undecided; and now a nap
Of her mother's dress seems to her the best.

The crook beneath the arm is made to fit
The careful scalp, and the wide gathering arm
Collects her sheaves of hair and stays all harm
And borders round a place for her to sit.

The young, bowed back is small enough that now
The legs are up, the knees are at her chin
And mother's thigh is pressed by daughter's shin
And flank takes weight of the now sagging brow.

A curl of body, nestled in the room
Made by the one who made her in her womb.

Jack Noutch

SPRING IN THE TIME OF CORONA

Zoomed in samples of life
smeared on my father's microscope,
there is a sameness of day's down here.
Wind through trees watched all day
repetitive motions calming the unknown.
A bank of poppies scattered long ago burst forth as
old grief mixes with new.

Thoughts clagged together in clay
crumble under pressure.
Buried pain tilled up with the worms
congeals in knotted stomach.
A silent scream in a patch of beans.
Stillness, there is no breeze.
Is there a solidity in unearthing,
blade pressing into mud -
keep digging. Well tilled soil is
a better place to grow new seeds.

Which, nestling up and out
from warm, dank comfort
must face frosty mornings,
wind, storms and the night.
Resilient, pulling up to light.
The fight does not appear as violent,
but maybe that is because
we have called it life.

Antonia Weir



Thank you for reading.
We hope you enjoyed.
To hear more, or to watch the
'Faith and poetry discussions' visit
<https://willibrord.squarespace.com/>

