

Poems in a Time of Coronavirus - Issue No. 3



This anthology contains prose and poems chosen by a group of friends from St Paul's Church Grove Park Chiswick on the theme of 'Colours', read to each other via Zoom on 16 April 2020.

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***Violet Elizabeth Bott* - extract from 'Just William's Luck', chapter 3
by Richmal Crompton**

'Action stations' ordered William. 'Can you see who it is Henry?'

'It's a girl' said Henry craning his head.

'It isn't even a girl' said William, in a tone of deep disgust, as he peered out of the door. 'It's Violet Elizabeth Bott.'

Violet Elizabeth was a child of six, with a dominating personality, a ruthless will and a misleadingly winsome expression. She also had a lisp that some people -though not the Outlaws- found engaging. Her chief aim in life was to attach herself to the Outlaws in general and to William in particular, and some uncanny instinct seemed to lead her unerringly to any place where they were.

'I've come to thee you, William,' said Violet Elizabeth in explanation of her presence.

'Well, now you've come, you can go away again,' said William ungraciously.

'But I don't want to,' said Violet Elizabeth sweetly.

'I want to thtay here.'

'Well we don't want you,' said William.

'That dothn't matter,' said Violet Elizabeth forgivingly, 'I don't mind.'

'Well we do,' said Douglas.

'You don't want to stay with people who don't want you, do you?' said Henry, trying subtler methods.

'Yeth, I do,' said Violet Elizabeth serenely. 'I want to play Indianth with you. I want to be a thquaw.'

'Well, we aren't playing Indians, so go away,' said William.

'What are you playing at?' said Violet Elizabeth.

'We're Knights of the Round Table,' said William.

'I'll be a Knight of the Round Table too,' said Violet Elizabeth.

'You can't be. Knights were men.'

Violet Elizabeth considered. 'I'll be a lady knight, then,' she said.

'No, you won't,' said William, ' 'cause there weren't any.'

'There would be if I wath one,' said Violet Elizabeth simply.

'They were knights I tell you. And knights means men. You couldn't do the things knights did, anyway.'

'What did they do?' said Violet Elizabeth.

'They went about rescuing damsels in distress,' said Henry.

Violet Elizabeth considered this. 'I'll be a damthel in dithtreth, then, shall I?' she said, beaming round at them, with the air of one who has solved a difficult problem to the satisfaction of all concerned. 'The you can rethcue me.'

'We jolly well don't want to rescue you,' said William.

'Why not?'

' 'cause we don't. That's why not.'

'That'th no reathon.'

'Oh shut up an' go away.'

But Violet Elizabeth was now firmly seated on the packing case, swinging her short sandalled legs.

'If you haven't got any damtheis in dithtreth to rethcue, you can't be knight,' she said and added: 'What ith a damthel in dithtreth?'

'Stop talkin' an' go away.'

Violet Elizabeth looked at the three stern faces and, seeing no relenting in any of them, decided to use her accustomed weapon.

'I'm going to cry,' she said in a choking voice.

'All right,' said William. 'Go on, cry! We don't care.'

Violet Elizabeth fluttered her curling lashes. Her blue eyes swam with tears. Her lips trembled.

'You've made me cry,' she said with a heartrending little catch in her voice. The tear filled eyes and choking voice had melted many a heart in their time, but they didn't melt the Outlaws'.

'Well get on with it,' said William. 'Don't take all day over it. Cry, if you're goin' to.'

But Violet Elizabeth was too good a tactician to waste her weapons. This one proving useless, she discarded it without further ado. The tears vanished from the blue eyes as suddenly as they had appeared.

'All right,' she said in her normal voice, 'If you won't let me be a lady knight, I'll thcream an' I'll thcream an' I'll thcream, till I'm thick – an' I can,' she ended proudly.

They looked at her nonplussed. They knew that she could. She had often proved her prowess in that field.

'We'd better let her William,' said Henry. 'If she starts screamin' someone'll hear an' come along an' make a row. They always do.'

'Oh, all right,' muttered William.

Chosen and read by Peter Capell

***Symphony in Yellow* by Oscar Wilde**

An omnibus across the bridge
Crawls like a yellow butterfly
And, here and there, a passer-by
Shows like a little restless midge

Big barges full of yellow hay
Are moored against the shadowy wharf,
And, like a yellow silken scarf,
The thick fog hangs across the quay.

The yellow leaves begin to fade
And flutter from the Temple elms,
And at my feet the pale green Thames
Lies like a rod of rippled jade.

Chosen and read by Katharine Makower

***Self Portrait on a Summer Evening* by Eavan Boland**

Jean-Baptiste Chardin
Is painting a woman
In the last summer light.

All summer long
he has been slighting her
in blotched blues, tints,
half tones, rinsed neutrals.

What you are watching
Is light unlearning itself,
An infinite unfrocking of the prism.

Before your eyes
The ordinary life
Is being glazed over;
Pigments of the bibelot
The cabochon, the water opal
Pearl to the intimate
Simple colours of
Her ankle-length summer skirt.

Truth makes shift;
The triptych shrinks
To the cabinet picture.
Can't you feel it?
Aren't you chilled by it?
The way the late afternoon
Is reduced to detail-

The sky that odd shape of apron-

Opaque, scumbled-
The lazulis of the horizon becoming
Optical greys
Before your eyes
Before your eyes
In my ankle-length
Summer skirt

Crossing between
The garden and the house
Under the whitebeam trees,
Keeping an eye on
The length of the grass,
The height of the hedge,
The distance of the children

I am Chardin's woman

Edged in reflected light,
hardened by
the need to be ordinary.

[Jean-Baptiste Chardin was a famous painter of still life in the 18th century. When he painted women they were always nurses, maids - ordinary women.
Eavan Boland is Irish and wrote this in 1987. She is a professor at Stanford University]

Chosen and read by Jackie Rayer

***Blackberry-Picking* by SEAMUS HEANEY**

Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

Chosen and read by Simon Surtees

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50981/blackberry-picking>

***Colour Blind* by Lemn Sissay**

If you can see the sepia in the sun
Shades of grey in fading streets
The radiating bloodshot in a child's eye
The dark stains on her linen sheets
If you can see oil separate on water
The turquoise of leaves on trees
The reddened flush of your lover's cheeks
The violet peace of calmed seas

If you can see the bluest eye
The purple in petals of the rose
The blue anger, the venom, of the volcano
The creeping orange of the lava flows
If you can see the red dust of the famished road
The white air tight strike of nike's sign
the skin tone of a Lucien Freud
The colours of his frozen subjects in mime

If you can see the white mist of the oasis
The red, white and blue that you defended
If you can see it all through the blackest pupil
The colours stretching the rainbow suspended
If you can see the breached blue dusk
And the caramel curls in swirls of tea
Why do you say you are colour blind when you see me?

Chosen and read by Shelagh Allsop

<http://blog.lemnissay.com/2011/10/09/colour-blind-a-poem/#sthash.95SnMCZW.dpbs>

***The Song of Wandering Aengus* by William Butler Yeats**

I went out to the hazel wood,
Because a fire was in my head,
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
And hooked a berry to a thread;
And when white moths were on the wing,
And moth-like stars were flickering out,
I dropped the berry in a stream
And caught a little silver trout.

When I had laid it on the floor
I went to blow the fire a-flame,
But something rustled on the floor,
And someone called me by my name:
It had become a glimmering girl
With apple blossom in her hair
Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

Chosen and read by Nan Owen

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55687/the-song-of-wandering-aengus>

***Life in Colour* by Ms Moem**

The pink of your cheeks
when the cold wind bites.
The intricacy of your iris
against the blank of the white.
The blue of a mood
that is saddened and dull.
The golden jubilation
of a cup half full.
The rainbow of joy.
The darkness of sorrow.
The green eye of the monster
who consumes your
todays and tomorrows.
The silver of wisdom;
The green shoots that thrive.
Embrace every colour
For they prove we're alive.

Chosen and read by Carolyn Ashford-Russell

<http://msmoem.com/2014/poems-about-life/life-in-colour/>

***Bonnard* by Elizabeth Jennings**

Colour of rooms. Pastel shades. Crowds. Torsos at ease in brilliant baths. And always,
everywhere the light.

This is a way of creating the world again, of seeing differences, of piling shadow on shadow,
of showing up distances, of bringing close, bringing close.

A way of furnishing too, of making yourself feel at home – and others. Pink, flame, coral,
yellow, magenta-extreme colours for ordinary situations. This is a way to make a new world.

Then watch it. Let the colours dry, let the carpets collect a little dust. Let the walls peel
gently, and people come, innocent, nude, eager for bed or bath.

They look newmade too, these bodies, newborn and innocent. Their flesh-tints fit the bright
walls and floors and they take a bath as if entering the first stream, the first fountain.

Chosen and read by Catherine Jessop

My many colored days by Dr Suess

Some days are yellow.
Some days are blue.
On different days
I'm different too.

You'd be surprised
How many ways
I change on
Different colored days.

On Bright Red Days
How good it feels
To be a horse
And kick my heels!

On other days
I'm other things.
On Bright Blue Days
I flap my wings.

Some days, of course
Feel sort of Brown.
Then I feel slow
And low, low down.

Then comes a yellow day
And wheeeeeeeeeeeeeeee
I am a
Busy, buzzy bee.

Gray day.....
Everything is gray.
I watch.
But nothing moves today.

Then all of a sudden
I'm a circus seal!
On my Orange Days
That's how I feel.

Green days.
Deep, deep in the sea.
Cool and quiet fish.
That's me.

On purple days I'm sad
I groan.
I drag my tail.
I walk alone.

But when my days
Are happy pink
It's great to jump
And just not think.

Then come my Black Days.
Mad. And loud.
I howl. I growl
At every cloud.

Then comes a mixed-up day.
And wham!
I don't know
Who or what I am!

But it all turns out
All right, you see.
And I go back
To being.....me.

Chosen and read by Mary Barnard

The Rainbow (from the Angel in the House) by Coventry-Patmore

A stately rainbow came and stood,
When I was young, in High-Hurst Park;
Its bright feet lit the hill and wood
Beyond, and cloud and sward were dark;
And I, who thought the splendour ours
Because the place was, t'wards it flew,
And there, amidst the glittering showers.
Gazed vainly for the glorious view,
With whatsoever's lovely, know
It is not ours; stand off to see;
Or beauty's apparition so
Puts on invisibility.

Chosen and read by Sheila White

Rainbow in pastels, by Suzy Kavsek



Suzy shared this picture of hers, via Zoom, after Sheila read the above poem.

The Living Mountain (an extract) by Nan Shepherd

I first saw it on a cloudless day of early July. We had started at dawn, crossed Cairn Gorm about nine o'clock, and made our way by the Saddle to the lower end of the loch. Then we idled up the side, facing the gaunt corrie, and at last, when the noonday sun penetrated directly into the water, we stripped and bathed. The clear water was at our knees, then at our thighs. How clear it was only this walking into it could reveal. To look through it was to discover its own properties. What we saw under the water had a sharper clarity than what we saw through air. We waded on into the brightness, and the width of the water increased, as it always does when one is on or in it, so that the loch no longer seemed narrow, but the far side was a long way off. Then I looked down; and at my feet there opened a gulf of brightness so profound that the mind stopped. We were standing on the edge of a shelf that ran some yards into the loch before plunging down to the pit that is the true bottom. And through that inordinate clearness we saw to the depth of the pit. So limpid was it that every stone was clear.

I motioned to my companion, who was a step behind, and she came, and glanced as I had down the submerged precipice. Then we looked into each other's eyes, and again into the pit. I waded slowly back into shallower water. There was nothing that seemed worth saying. My spirit was as naked as my body. It was one of the most defenceless moments of my life.

Chosen and read by Sam Hearn

One Perfect Rose by Dorothy Parker

A single flow'r he sent me, since we met.
All tenderly his message he chose;
Deep-hearted, pure, with scented dew still wet –
One perfect rose.

I knew the language of the floweret;
'My fragile leaves' it said, 'his heart enclose.'
Love long has taken for his amulet
One perfect rose.

Why is it no one ever sent me yet
One perfect limousine, do you suppose?
Ah no, it's always just my luck to get
One perfect rose.

Chosen and read by Sue Hearn