

Poems in a Time of Coronavirus - Issue No. 13



This anthology contains poems and prose chosen by a group of friends from St Paul's Church Grove Park Chiswick on the theme of 'Old Age', shared with each other via Zoom on 25 June 2020.

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The Old Man's Complaints. And how he gained them by Robert Southey

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
The few locks which are left you are grey;
You are hale, Father William, a hearty old man,
Now tell me the reason I pray.

In the days of my youth, Father William replied,
I remember'd that youth would fly fast,
And abused not my health and my vigour at first
That I never might need them at last.

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
And pleasures with youth pass away,
And yet you lament not the days that are gone,
Now tell me the reason I pray.

In the days of my youth, Father William replied,
I remember'd that youth could not last;
I thought of the future whatever I did,
That I never might grieve for the past.

You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
And life must be hastening away;
You are chearful, and love to converse upon death!
Now tell me the reason I pray.

I am chearful, young man, Father William replied,
Let the cause thy attention engage;
In the days of my youth I remember'd my God!
And He hath not forgotten my age.

Chosen and read by Peter Capell

Father William by Lewis Carroll (inspired by Southey's poem above)

"You are old, father William," the young man said,

"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head —
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," father William replied to his son,
"I feared it would injure the brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."

"You are old," said the youth, "as I mentioned before,

And have grown most uncommonly fat;
Yet you turned a back-somersault in at the door
— Pray, what is the reason of that?"

"In my youth," said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,

"I kept all my limbs very supple
By the use of this ointment — one shilling the box —
Allow me to sell you a couple."

"You are old," said the youth, "and your jaws are too weak

For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak —
Pray, how did you manage to do it?"

"In my youth," said his father, "I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted the rest of my life."

"You are old," said the youth; one would hardly suppose
That your eye was as steady as ever;
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose
— What made you so awfully clever?"

"I have answered three questions, and that is enough,"
Said his father; "don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!"

Chosen and read by Katharine Makower



When forty winters shall besiege thy brow (Sonnet 2) by William Shakespeare

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tatter'd weed, of small worth held:
Then being ask'd where all thy beauty lies,
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,
Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.
How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use,
If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine
Shall sum my count and make my old excuse,'
Proving his beauty by succession thine!
 This were to be new made when thou are old,
 And see thy blood warm when thou feel's it cold.

Chosen and read by Roderick Thirkell-White

When You Are Old by W B Yeats

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Chosen and read by Shelagh Allsop

***My Younger Days* by Maya Angelou**

When I was in my younger days,
I weighed a few pounds less,
I needn't hold my tummy in
to wear a belted dress.

But now that I am older,
I've set my body free;
There's the comfort of elastic
Where once my waist would be.

Inventor of those high-heeled shoes
My feet have not forgiven;
I have to wear a nine now,
But used to wear a seven.

And how about those pantyhose-
They're sized by weight, you see,
So how come when I put them on
The crotch is at my knee?

I need to wear these glasses
As the print's been getting smaller;
And it wasn't very long ago
I know that I was taller.

Though my hair has turned to gray
and my skin no longer fits,
On the inside, I'm the same old me,
It's the outside's changed a bit.

Chosen and read by Victoria Lynch

Reír Llorando by Juan de Dios Peza, translated by Nicolas Uribe

Viendo a Garrick -actor de la Inglaterra-
el pueblo al aplaudirlo le decía:
“Eres el más gracioso de la tierra,
y más feliz...” y el cómico reía.

Víctimas del spleen, los altos lores
en sus noches más negras y pesadas,
iban a ver al rey de los actores,
y cambiaban su spleen en carcajadas.

Una vez, ante un médico famoso,
llegóse un hombre de mirar sombrío:
sufro -le dijo-, un mal tan espantoso
como esta palidez del rostro mío.

Nada me causa encanto ni atractivo;
no me importan mi nombre ni mi suerte;
en un eterno spleen muriendo vivo,
y es mi única pasión la de la muerte.

-Viajad y os distraeréis. -¡Tanto he viajado!
-Las lecturas buscad. -¡Tanto he leído!
-Que os ame una mujer. -¡Si soy amado!
-Un título adquirid. -¡Noble he nacido!

-¿Pobre seréis quizá? -Tengo riquezas.
-¿De lisonjas gustáis? -¡Tantas escucho!

-¿Qué tenéis de familia? -Mis tristezas.
-¿Vais a los cementerios? -Mucho...
mucho.

-De vuestra vida actual ¿tenéis testigos?

Watching Garrick, English master of the stage,
A spellbound public marveled at his craft.
“You’re the greatest and most wondrous of
our age!”
The actor, though, dismissed them with a
laugh.

Many a lord and lady, theater-bound,
Sought solace in the actor’s fine-honed skill.
His consummate performances were found
To cure their spleens, and every other ill!

A man of parlous visage, grim and pale,
Did seek a famous doctor’s sage advice.
His gaze was haunted and his body frail;
His face was pallid and his hands were cold as
ice.

“You find me, Doctor, on the verge of death.
To me, both fame and fortune are a lie.
My sickly spleen does take away my breath
And the only hope I harbor is to die!”

“Travel, my good man!” “I’ve been round the
world and back!”
“Devote your time to books!” “Volumes have I
read!”
“A lady’s love, perhaps?” “There’s not been
any lack.”
“A title or a peerage, then?” “Nobly was I
bred!”

“Are you poor, perchance?” “I’ve savings for
tomorrow.”
“Perhaps you seek acclaim.” “To fame I’m now
immune.”
“And have you next of kin?” “My kinfolk are
my sorrows.”
“And what about the dead?” “I know I’ll join
them soon.”

“Your present life contents you as it stands?”

-Sí, mas no dejo que me impongan yugos:
yo les llamo a los muertos mis amigos;
y les llamo a los vivos, mis verdugos.

Me deja -agrega el médico- perplejo
vuestro mal, y no debe acobardaros;
tomad hoy por receta este consejo
"Sólo viendo a Garrick podréis curaros".

-¿A Garrick? -Sí, a Garrick... La más remisa
y austera sociedad le busca ansiosa;
todo aquel que lo ve muere de risa;
¡Tiene una gracia artística asombrosa!

-¿Y a mí me hará reír? -¡Ah! sí, os lo juro;
Él sí; nada más él; más... ¿qué os inquieta?
-Así -dijo el enfermo-, no me curo:
¡Yo soy Garrick!... Cambiadme la receta.

¡Cuántos hay que, cansados de la vida,
enfermos de pesar, muertos de tedio,
hacen reír como el actor suicida,
sin encontrar para su mal remedio!

¡Ay! ¡Cuántas veces al reír se llora!
¡Nadie en lo alegre de la risa fíe,
porque en los seres que el dolor devora
el alma llora cuando el rostro ríe!

Si se muere la fe, si huye la calma,
si sólo abrojos nuestra planta pisa,
lanza a la faz la tempestad del alma
un relámpago triste: la sonrisa.

El carnaval del mundo engaña tanto,
que las vidas son breves mascaradas;
aquí aprendemos a reír con llanto,
y también a llorar con carcajada

Chosen and read by Sam Hearn with thanks to Juanita Giles

"Indeed it does; I'm free of obligations.
No living soul my fleeting time commands,
While the dead have no such aspirations."

"A case most strange," the goodly doctor
mused.
"Though nonetheless I trust we'll find a cure.
I think you ought to try to be amused,
And Garrick is the one to see, for sure!"

"Garrick, did you say?" "Yes, Garrick! All
The patrons of the arts adore his act.
Without a doubt his name you will recall.
I saw him once myself, in fact!

"And... I too will laugh?" "Of course!
If he can't help you, no one will."
"I'm sorry," said the patient with remorse.
"For I am Garrick... and I'm sickly still."

How many are there who wearily live
With burdens of sadness, and grief and
despair?
Impressions of happiness laughingly give
Like Garrick, whose sorrow was too much to
bear?

How many are there, who laugh when they
cry!
How bitter the tears that flow from the eyes
That try to pretend that all's well, and deny
The sadness that deep down inside of them
lies.

Once faith is lost, and hope dispelled
And only sorrow greets our furrowed gaze,
One's apt to smile, as if compelled
To pierce the darkness with resplendent rays.

This world is but a bitter masquerade,
A stage whose props are set askew.
A sordid show, a pitiful charade
With actors who both laugh and cry on cue.

I'm Fine - Anon

There is nothing whatever the matter with me,
I'm just as healthy as I can be,
I have arthritis in both my knees,
And when I talk, I talk with a wheeze.
My pulse is weak and my blood is thin,
But, I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in!

My teeth eventually have to come out.
And my diet, I hate to think about.
I'm overweight, and I can't get thin,
But, I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in!

Arch supports I have for my feet
Or I wouldn't be able to walk on the street.
My memory is failing and my head's in a spin.
I'm practically living on aspirin,
But, I'm awfully well for the shape I'm in!

The moral is, as this tale we unfold
That for you and me who are growing old,
It's better to say "I'm Fine" with a grin.
Than to let them know the shape we're in!

Chosen and read by Hillie MacLaren

***My Rival* by Rudyard Kipling**

I go to concert, party, ball --
What profit is in these?
I sit alone against the wall
And strive to look at ease.
The incense that is mine by right
They burn before her shrine;
And that's because I'm seventeen
And She is forty-nine.

I cannot check my girlish blush,
My color comes and goes;
I redden to my finger-tips,
And sometimes to my nose.
But She is white where white should be,
And red where red should shine.
The blush that flies at seventeen
Is fixed at forty-nine.

I wish I had Her constant cheek;
I wish that I could sing
All sorts of funny little songs,
Not quite the proper thing.
I'm very gauche and very shy,
Her jokes aren't in my line;
And, worst of all, I'm seventeen
While She is forty-nine.

The young men come, the young men go
Each pink and white and neat,
She's older than their mothers, but
They grovel at Her feet.
They walk beside Her 'rickshaw wheels --
None ever walk by mine;
And that's because I'm seventeen
And She is forty-nine.

Chosen and read by Mary Barnard

She rides with half a dozen men,
(She calls them "boys" and "mashers")
I trot along the Mall alone;
My prettiest frocks and sashes
Don't help to fill my programme-card,
And vainly I repine
From ten to two A.M. Ah me!
Would I were forty-nine!

She calls me "darling," "pet," and "dear,"
And "sweet retiring maid."
I'm always at the back, I know,
She puts me in the shade.
She introduces me to men,
"Cast" lovers, I opine,
For sixty takes to seventeen,
Nineteen to forty-nine.

But even She must older grow
And end Her dancing days,
She can't go on forever so
At concerts, balls and plays.
One ray of priceless hope I see
Before my footsteps shine;
Just think, that She'll be eighty-one
When I am forty-nine.

***The Small Celandine* by William Wordsworth**

There is a flower, the Lesser Celandine,
That shrinks, like many more, from cold and rain;
And, the first moment that the sun may shine,
Bright as the sun himself, 'tis out again!

When hailstones have been falling swarm on swarm,
Or blasts the green field and the trees distrest,
Oft have I seen it muffled up from harm,
In close self-sheltered, like a Thing at rest.

But lately, one rough day, this Flower I passed,
And recognised it, though an altered Form,
Now standing forth an offering to the Blast,
And buffeted at will by Rain and Storm.

I stopped, and said with inly muttered voice,
'It doth not love the shower, nor seek the cold;
This neither is its courage nor its choice,
But its necessity in being old.

'The sunshine may not bless it, nor the dew;
It cannot help itself in its decay;
Stiff in its members, withered, changed of hue'
And, in my spleen, I smiled that it was grey.

To be a Prodigal's Favorite –then, worse truth,
A Miser's Pensioner – behold our lot!
O Man! that from thy fair and shining youth
Age might but take the things Youth needed not

Chosen and read by Jackie Rayer



***I'm still here* by Pat A. Fleming**

My looks are nothing special,
My face reveals my age,
My body shows some wear and tear,
And my energy's not the same.

Too often my memory fails me,
And I lose things all the time.
One minute I know what I plan to do,
And the next it may just slip my mind.

I try hard to avoid my mirror.
There are things I would rather not see,
And even those times when I just catch a glimpse,
I can no longer recognize me.

The things I used to do with ease
Can now cause aches and pains,
And the quality of the things I do
Will never be quite the same.

I always compare my older self
To those younger versions of me,
And I know I'm wasting too much time
Missing who I used to be.

But the thing that really makes me sad
Is despite what people see,
Underneath my tattered, worn out shell,
I'm still the same old me.

My heart can still feel endless love,
And at times it still can ache.
My heart can fill with so much joy,
And then it can suddenly break.

My soul can still feel sympathy
And longs for forgiveness and peace,
And there are times its light shines boldly
through,
And times when it longs for release.

It's true, maybe now that I'm older,
Feeling lonely may be status quo,
But it also has made me more willing
To forgive and let past conflicts go.

So maybe to some I look ugly and old,
A person who barely exists.
I'm still quite aware of the beauty inside,
And my value should not be dismissed.

So although not as strong and no beauty, it's
true,
I'm still here and want so much to live,
And I know that there's no one in this world
quite like me,
And no one who has more to give.

Chosen and read by Carolyn Ashford-Russell

***Old Tree* by Chris Magadza**

Old tree
Giant towering
Above the forest;

You
Who saw the rise
Of ancient suns,
The fall of principalities,
The ageing of creation;

You
Who drank the drought
And bathed in mists
Of thousand winters
Cold;

You who heard
The rapture of mountains,
The breach of the seas
And the angry thunder
Of broken waters
Icy;

Silent,
Timeless
In ageless majesty,
Sleepless guardian
Of mysteries old;

You
Whose confiding silence
Heard plotters
Whisper conspiracy
On your night probing branches;

You who heard
The savage angry cry
Of angel turned brute,
Seen the slaughter of
Father by son,
The rape of sister by brother,
The innocence of infancy
Starve to laughing demon;

Yet,
Every morning
A new orient bride
You kiss,
And sip the ancient nectars
From the earth's hidden veins;

And every blessing summer
Adorned in new blossom
More life
You bring on earth.

Chosen and read by Sue Hearn

First Flight by Joyce Grenfell

“Oh, the little light’s come on. ‘Fasten your seat belt.’ Well, I will if I can! I’ve had too much dinner. Can you manage yours?”

“Oh my goodness me. You have been working hard. I never saw anything like it. All the Way. Do you know, I didn’t like to speak to you? I thought to myself; I bet he’s on a business trip... I thought you were...Oh you have worked hard.”

“No, no, I’m on a holiday. It’s my first visit to America. It is exciting. But of course, you know what it is going to look like, don’t you? I mean, you’ve seen it on the films, and the telly and that. I think it’s a shame really, I’d like to have been surprised. Still it may feel a bit different, you know, when you get there.”

“Oh, what’s that bumpity bump? Oh, yes, it’s a cloud. Look. The window’s gone all white. Ah, blue again. That’s better.”

“Do you know we really are nearly coming down?”

“Oh, my. Yes, it is my first flight. Well, I tell a lie really because I once went to Jersey, but I didn’t like it. I came back on the boat. But this is my first proper flight with food. And I think it’s nice, you know, to get the souvenir picture postcards of the aeroplane. I’m going to give them to my grandchildren. They’ll have to draw lots – which one has it.”

“Don’t you want yours? Are you sure? Well I wasn’t dropping a hint but if you can spare it well that will be lovely. Thank you very much. I’ll tell them that I sat next to a very nice man on the aeroplane and he gave me this picture postcard.”

“Do you know I haven’t seen my grandchildren yet? Well, I haven’t seen my son for five years. He went out to America on a contract and he wasn’t sure, you know, whether he’d settle or that, but he has and he likes it very, well he’s done well and he’s had several promotions. And...”

“Oh, he’s in electronics. And when the last one came he said “Come on over Mum, I’ll give you the trip.””

“Yeah, it is nice.”

“He is, he’s very bright, but he’s not spoiled with it.”

“Well, they live at a place called, um, er, I think it’s called Stamford, Connect-icut.”

“Oh, is that how you pronounce it? Well I shan’t have to mention it when I’m there.”

“They are going to meet me in New York. Yes.”

“Yes, he has married an American girl. She’s an Afro-American girl. A black girl. I do hope I’m going to do it all right. You know, I’d like to be absolutely natural, you know, to make it easy for them that...”

“When the, the letter first came I did have a, well, you know, I didn’t quite know what... but I’ve brought up my son Kev, and his sister, I’ve brought them up to that it isn’t who you are it’s what you are that matters. And you know, honestly, I do believe that.”

“I suppose it sounds a funny thing to say, but in some ways I’m, I’m very glad that his Dad...”

“Well I lost him about six years ago. He was a dear man but he didn’t like change, you know. He liked what he was used to. He liked pattern and he liked life to go on just exactly as it always had and I think he might have found the adjustment might have been a bit, but”

“My father. My father he was the most marvellous man with people. Do you know he could always get right into the middle of a person and he was well liked. He loved people. He didn’t mind who they were, where they were, it was just my...”

“He was a gardener you know, and he said, well, you’ve got time to think. You put something in the ground and you got to wait til it comes up. “

“I thought the world of my father. I could do with having him with me right now, I can tell you.”

“I don’t know whether I think it is easier for a mixed marriage in Britain or in America. There must be more of them in America mustn’t there?”

“But I’d like to have them living near me. You know, running in and out and that. And then I wonder because, where I live, people are very narrow.”

“They lead very little lives. You know, none of them use their front rooms. Well, they’ve all got them you know, but they don’t use them. They’ve got matching net curtains all the way up but they don’t use their front rooms.”

“A woman in my church said to me the other day, she said “It’s no good you going on about us all being the same. I mean I look in the mirror, I’m pink. They look in the mirror, they’re brown. I mean, we’re different. We are meant to be different.” She said and I thought to myself, well I’m quite glad I am different from you. Well, she’s got some very funny false teeth...I shouldn’t have said that. No, well it wasn’t kind but you know, she gets on my wick”.

“I said look, look I said look, I mean people are going to be different to people always. You have to realise that. But in the sight of God I’m absolutely certain we’re all exact...I hope you didn’t mind me saying that.”

“Well people don’t like you to mention things like that do they? They get embarrassed and start counting their buttons.”

“But I don’t know, I’m used to it. My father was open. He would talk about anything and he was, quite, talked about that kind of thing.”

“Do you know I think we are coming in quite soon. We must be. Look, do you know there’s some little cars down there. Little pastel coloured cars we don’t take...can you see them? Oh, you’ve seen it before, haven’t you?”

“There’s a swimming pool behind that house. I think we are going to touch down any minute now.”

“Ooh they’ve put those brakes on much too fast – I don’t like it. The whole thing’s shuddering. Are you sure it’s alright? Oh, I don’t like it.”

“I’m glad they’ve put the music on. That’s a bit better. Oh my, you must think me silly. Well America, here I come.”

“Two grandchildren, two. A boy and a girl.”

“Yes, I’ve got lovely snaps of them. One’s very, very dark and the other, honestly, you’d hardly notice. And his wife is lovely looking. And I know he’d never marry someone who wasn’t nice.”

“She writes me such nice letters too. She calls me ‘Mother Constock’. My name is Mrs Constock and she says “Dear Mother Constock”. I like that. I think, you know, it’s kind of lively.”

“When I think of my mother-in-law, I never called her anything for 25 years.”

“Well, you know, sometimes “Dear” in a time of crisis.”

“But I think that’s nice, you know, ‘Mother Constock’.”

“Oh, they met at a concert. He is very musical is Kev. Yes.”

“I wonder, do you think there is perhaps a place where they could be watching the aeroplane come in? Don’t they have, I don’t know, observation terraces or that?”

“Well the plane is turning.”

“There’s a building coming in now.”

“I think there are some people up there, on a kind of terrace place. Yes, there are.”

“They’re there! They’re *all* there!”

“Oh, I do hope I do it alright. I just want to do it alright.”

Chosen and read by Simon Surtees