

Poems in a Time of Coronavirus - Issue No. 15



This anthology contains poems and prose chosen by a group of friends from St Paul's Church Grove Park Chiswick on the theme of 'Families', shared with each other via Zoom on 9 July 2020.

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***Don't* by Michael Rosen**

Don't
Don't do,
Don't, do
Don't do that.
Don't pull faces,
Don't tease the cat.
Don't pick your ears,
Don't be rude at school.
Who do they think I am?
Some kind of fool?
One day they'll say
Don't put toffee in my coffee
Don't pour gravy on the baby
Don't put beer in his ear
Don't stick your toes up your nose.
Don't put confetti on your spaghetti
and don't squash peas on your knees.
Don't put ants in your pants
Don't put mustard in your custard
Don't chuck jelly at the telly
and don't throw at a computer
Don't throw fruit at a computer.
Don't what?
Don't throw fruit at a computer
Don't what?
Don't throw fruit at a computer
Who do they think I am?
Some kind of fool?

Poem and Youtube clip chosen by Shelagh Allsop

Youtube clip: [Don't](#)

The Importance of being Ernest – an excerpt by Oscar Wilde

Jack: Lady Bracknell I hate to be inquisitive, but would you kindly inform me who I am?

Lady Bracknell: I am afraid that the news that I have to give you will not altogether please you. You are the son of my poor sister, Mrs Moncrieff, and consequently Algernon's elder brother.

.....

Jack: Then the question must be cleared up at once. Aunt Augusta, a moment. At the time when Miss Prism left me in the hand-bag, had I been christened already?

Lady Bracknell: Every luxury that money can buy, including christening, had been lavished on you by your fond and doting parents.

Jack: Then I was christened! That is settled. Now, what name was I given? Let me know the worst.

Lady Bracknell: Being the eldest son you were naturally christened after your father.

Jack: [*Irritably.*] Yes, but what was my father's Christian name?

Lady Bracknell: [*Meditatively.*] I cannot at the present moment recall what the General's Christian name was. But I have no doubt that he had one. He was eccentric, I admit. But only in later years. And that was the result of the Indian climate, and marriage, and indigestion, and other things of that kind.

Jack: Algy! Can't you recall what our father's Christian name was?

Algernon: My dear boy, we were never on speaking terms. He died when I was a year old.

Jack: His name would appear in Army Lists of the of the period, I suppose Aunt Augusta?

Lady Bracknell: The General was essentially a man of peace, except in his domestic life. But I have no doubt that his name would appear in any military directory.

Jack: The Army Lists of the last forty years are here. These delightful records should have been my constant study. [*Rushes to bookcase and tears books out.*] M. Generals ... Mallam, Maxbohm, Magley, what ghastly names they have – Markby, Migsby, Mobbs, Moncrieff! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant-Colonel, Colonel, General 1869, Christian names Ernest John. [*Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly.*] I always told you, Gwendolen, my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well it is Ernest after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest.

Lady Bracknell: Yes, now I remember I had some particular reason for disliking the name.

Chosen and read by Sam Hearn

***The Quarrel* by Eleanor Farjeon**

I quarrelled with my brother,
I don't know what about,
One thing led to another
And somehow we fell out.
The start of it was slight,
The end of it was strong,
He said he was right,
I knew he was wrong!
We hated one another.
The afternoon turned black.
Then suddenly my brother
Thumped me on the back,
And said, "Oh, come on!
We can't go on all night—
I was in the wrong."
So he was in the right.

Chosen and read by Angus MacLaren

***They should have asked my husband* by Pam Ayres**

You know, this world is complicated and imperfect and oppressed,
And it's not hard to feel timid, apprehensive and depressed,
It seems that all around us, tides of questions ebb and flow,
And people want solutions, but they don't know where to go.

Opinions abound but who is wrong and who is right?
People need a prophet, a diffuser of the light,
Someone they can turn to as the crises rage and swirl,
Someone with the remedy, the wisdom, the pearl...

* Well they should have asked my husband, he's a man who likes his say,
With his thoughts on immigration, teenage mums, Theresa May,
The future of the monarchy, the latest Brexit shocks,
The wait for hip replacements, and the rubbish on the box.

Yes, they should have asked my husband, he can sort out any mess,
He can rejuvenate the railways, he can cure the NHS,
So any little niggle, anything you want to know,
Just run it past my husband, wind him up and let him go.

Congestion on the motorways, free holidays for thugs,
The damage to the ozone layer, refugees, drugs,
These may defeat the brain of any politician bloke,
But present it to my husband, he will solve it at a stroke.

He'll clarify the situation, he will make it crystal clear,
You'll feel the glazing of your eyeballs and the bending of your ear,
You may lose the will to live, you may feel your shoulders slump,
When he talks about the President, Mr. Donald Trump. *

Upon these areas he brings his intellect to shine,
In a great compelling voice that's twice as loud as yours or mine,
I often wonder what it must be like to be so strong,
Infallible, articulate, self-confident and wrong.

When it comes to tolerance, he hasn't got a lot,
Joy riders should be guillotined, and muggers should be shot,
The sound of his own voice becomes like music to his ears,
And he hasn't got an inkling that he's boring us to tears.

My friends don't call so often, they have busy lives I know,
But it's not every day you want to hear a windbag suck and blow,
Google? Safari? On them we never call,
Why bother with computers...when my husband knows it all.

Chosen and read by Hillie MaLaren

***A Grand Obsession* by Geoffrey Summerfield**

Grandma said, with a nod of her head,
As sure as one and one make two,
I'll go and see the Grand Canyon
If it's the last thing I do!

So every day for years
She saved all her cash,
Sometimes frowned and shook her head:
'I think I'm being very rash.'

Once a month she wondered,
But that grand hole in the ground
Sat tight inside her head
All the year round.

Finally she'd saved enough
And went and paid her fare.
Put piles of cash on the counter,
And said 'Now I'll soon be there!'

Slowly she packed her bags.
'Shall I take this coat or that?
Does it ever rain in Arizona?
Shall I need to take a hat?'

A Jumbo took her to Los Angeles,
An elephant with wings;
She saw millions of cars like performing fleas
Going round and round in rings.

She went to look at the film stars' homes,
To peep and poke her nose.
But all she saw was fences and walls
And a gardener with a hose.

Then round Las Vegas's neon streets
She took a daring ramble,
Saw elastic acrobats cabaret
And decided not to gamble.

Then she took the coach to the Canyon,
Her eyes nearly popped out of her head.
The sunset glowed on redstone cliffs.
'It's even better than they said!'

Next morning bright and early,
Almost before first light,
She went to the local airfield
And asked to take a flight.

A young pilot said he'd take her
And show her all the sights.
'But your plane's so very small!' she said.
'Is it big enough for flights?'

The pilot held up his finger.
'The wind's not too strong,' he said.
So they clambered aboard and took off,
And she thought, 'I'll soon be dead.'

He flew straight into the Canyon,
And tipped the plane on its side.
'You've never seen anything like this!' he said.
'Are you enjoying the ride?'

Her stomach went quite crazy.
The blood rushed to her head.
Her vision went blurred and hazy.
'It's very interesting,' she said.

Soon she got used to the flying,
And sat back snug in her seat.
Saw great rocks, and the river winding
Like a ribbon beneath her feet....

A week later we met her at the airport,
Safe and sound, back on land.
'How'd you like the Grand Canyon?' we asked
her.
'The Grand Canyon? Oh, it was grand!'

***My Auntie* by Colin West**

My Auntie who lives in
Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrob
ylllantysiliogogogoch
Has asked me to stay.

But unfortunately
Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrob
ylllantysiliogogoch
Is a long, long way away.

Will I ever go to
Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrob
ylllantysiliogogoch
It's difficult to say.

All three chosen and read by Peter Capell



***To My Daughter* by Stephen Spender**

Bright clasp of her whole hand
Around my finger
My daughter as we walk together now
All my life I'll feel a ring invisibly
Circle this bone with shining:
When she is grown
Far from today as her eyes are far already.

Chosen and read by Katharine Makower

***Look you!* by Colin West**

Once in Wales
We saw
A frogogogogoch
Lleaping ofor
A llogogogogoch

***The Mother* by Robert Service**

There will be a singing in your heart,
There will be a rapture in your eyes;
You will be a woman set apart,
You will be so wonderful and wise.
You will sleep, and when from dreams your start,
As of one that wakes in Paradise,
There will be a singing in your heart,
There will be a rapture in your eyes.

There will be a moaning in your heart,
There will be an anguish in your eyes,
You will see your dearest ones depart,
You will hear their quivering good-byes.
You will be the heart-ache and the smart,
Tears that scald and lonely sacrifice;
There will be a moaning in your heart,
There will be an anguish in your eyes.

There will come a glory in your eyes,
There will come a peace within your heart;
Singing 'neath the quiet evening skies,
Time will dry the tear and dull the smart.
You will know that you have played your part,
You shall be the love that never dies:
You, with Heaven's peace within your heart,
You, with God's own glory in your eyes.

Chosen and read by Bill White

Atonement – an excerpt by Ian McEwan

The smallest shift in her gaze brought her Leon's face, but he was staring politely at his friend and seemed determined not to meet her eye. As children they used to torment each other with 'the look' at the Sunday lunches their parent gave for elderly relatives. These were awesome occasions worthy of the ancient silver service; the venerable great-uncles and aunts and grandparents were Victorians, from their mother's side of the family, a baffled and severe folk, a lost tribe who arrived at the house in black cloaks having wandered peevishly for two decades in an alien, frivolous century. They terrified the ten-year-old Cecilia and her twelve-year-old brother, and a giggling fit was always just breath away. The one who caught the look was helpless, the one who bestowed it, immune. Mostly, the power was with Leon whose look was mock-solemn, and consisted of drawing the corners of his mouth downwards while rolling his eyes. He might ask Cecilia in the most innocent voice for the salt to be passed, and though she averted her gaze as she handed it to him, though she turned her head and inhaled deeply, it could be enough simply to know that he was doing his look to consign her to ninety minutes of quaking torture. Meanwhile Leon would be free, needing only to top her up occasionally if he thought she was beginning to recover. Only rarely had she reduced him with an expression of haughty pouting. Since the children were sometimes seated between adults, giving the look had its dangers – making faces at table could bring down disgrace and an early bedtime. The trick was to make the attempt while passing between, say, licking one's lips and smiling broadly, and at the same time catch the other's eye. On one occasion they had looked up and delivered their looks simultaneously, causing Leon to spray soup from his nostrils onto the wrist of a great-aunt. Both children were banished to their rooms for the rest of the day.

Chosen and read by Mary Barnard

***Half Got Out* by Will Harris**

I was reading a poem by
Ben Jonson where a
newborn *half got out* sees
the city burning and
decides to crawl back
into its mother's womb
thine urn he calls it
it was Tuesday morning
I'd just seen Leo near
Leicester Square he
was reading a book by
W. S. Merwin a poet
himself newly returned
to his dead mother's
womb *I was feeling so
anxious* Leo said *kind of
low when I started to
read him it felt like I found
him at just the right time*
I'm not sure but don't
parents always talk of
their children arriving at
just the right time like
you might describe
finding your flip flops
just before a beach
holiday yes I said to Leo
he wrote that poem
didn't he that sad dad
poem that starts

—*My friend says I was not a good son
—you understand
—I say yes I understand
—he says I did not go
—to see my parents very often you know
—and I say yes I know*

I love the way the
dialogue loops back in
on itself the way you
know the poet is really
talking to or about
themselves it hurts to
read it it reminds me

I could be seeing my
parents right now who
live ten stops away *yes
half an hour* but I'm
not and what else am I
not doing knowing
really knowing from
my top down to my
toes from whose bourne
they'll not return *you
have to work though you
have to make a living don't
you* that may be true I
don't know I left the
library in light rain to

meet Linda for a drink
at *The Chandos* and she
told me her granddad
used to go to Richmond
Park to fish he was a
wireless operating
sergeant during the war
it's not like she cares it's
just funny you know
even if she had a
Victoria Cross taped to
her forehead it wouldn't
stop those dickheads at
the bar from asking if
she's Latino or something
*I fucking hate this city you
understand* I say *yes
I understand but I don't
know how to leave* I say *yes
I know I mean sorry
I don't know I don't
know how to leave or
where I'd even go*

I looped back to enter
the tube at Leicester
Square stepping over the
body of a homeless man
to travel further again

from my mother's
womb to Turnpike Lane
the word *interred* echoing
in my head how many
acres of earth were there
above me then the
whole city might have
been burning I could
already have been dead

there's no going back my dad
said but how many times
have I crossed the point
of no return only to
crawl back down King
St or Goldhawk Rd
to eat chicken noodle
soup and talk about seat
cushions from Lidl *yes*
I know they're good value
thank you for dinner thank

Chosen and read by Elizabeth Barnard

you half got out and
half enwombed I know
that's just the way it is I
understand the tube
threading me like a
complex stitch beneath
and through the city
back to the house we've
been sharing lately
when I got in I said I'm
home and you said *yes*
I know and then you
filled the kettle and sat
down next to me and
said

***I must not tease my mother* by Lydia Howard Huntly Sigourney Hartford (Connecticut early 19th century)**

Sam

I must not tease my mother,
For she is very kind:
And everything she says to me
I must directly mind;
For when I was a baby,
And could not speak or walk.
She let me in her bosom sleep,
And taught me how to talk.

I must not tease my mother;
And when she likes to read,
Or has a headache, I will step
Most silently indeed:
I will not choose a noisy play,
Nor trifling troubles tell,
But sit down quiet by her side
And try to make her well.

I must not tease my mother;
I've heard dear father say
When I was in my cradle sick
She nursed me night and day;
She lays me in my little bed,
She gives me clothes and food,
And I have nothing else to pay
But trying to be good.

I must not tease my mother;
She loves me all the day,
And she has patience with my faults,
And teaches me to pray.
How much I'll strive to please her
She every hour shall see;
For should she go away and die
What would become of me?

Chosen and read by Jackie Rayer



“This poem reminds me of my childhood when I was always being told by dad not to tease my mum. This photo is of the family in the summer of 1939.” **Jackie Rayer**

The Stick-Together Families by Edgar Guest

The stick-together families are happier by far
Than the brothers and the sisters who take separate highways are.
The gladdest people living are the wholesome folks who make
A circle at the fireside that no power but death can break.
And the finest of conventions ever held beneath the sun
Are the little family gatherings when the busy day is done.

There are rich folk, there are poor folk, who imagine they are wise,
And they're very quick to shatter all the little family ties.
Each goes searching after pleasure in his own selected way,
Each with strangers likes to wander, and with strangers likes to play.
But it's bitterness they harvest, and it's empty joy they find,
For the children that are wisest are the stick-together kind.

There are some who seem to fancy that for gladness they must roam,
That for smiles that are the brightest they must wander far from home.
That the strange friend is the true friend, and they travel far astray
they waste their lives in striving for a joy that's far away,
But the gladdest sort of people, when the busy day is done,
Are the brothers and the sisters who together share their fun.

It's the stick-together family that wins the joys of earth,
That hears the sweetest music and that finds the finest mirth;
It's the old home roof that shelters all the charm that life can give;
There you find the gladdest play-ground, there the happiest spot to live.
And, O weary, wandering brother, if contentment you would win,
Come you back unto the fireside and be comrade with your kin.

My Mexican Family by Osvaldo Govea

Rancheritas I hear
Carne asada I smell
The frijoles charros are almost done
It's time to eat
It's time for some fun
As my grandpa downs his beer
And my mom finishes her tequila
They start singing
Jamming out to some Vicente Fernandez
Beer after beer

Shot after shot
Grandpa will start dancing by himself
While mom lets out a big "Vicente" yell
As the cheladas are being made
Down they go one by one
It's dark now
Plans for the morning are now done
The breakfast of champions will be made
And everybody's hangover will go away.....
The menudo is ready and now being served

Both chosen and read by Carolyn Ashford-Russell

'The Grampie Trap' (officially known as The Children's Hour) by H W Longfellow

Between the dark and the daylight,
When the night is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day's occupations,
That is known as the Children's Hour.

I hear in the chamber above me
The patter of little feet,
The sound of a door that is opened,
And voices soft and sweet.

From my study I see in the lamplight,
Descending the broad hall stair,
Grave Alice, and laughing Allegra,
And Edith with golden hair.

A whisper, and then a silence:
Yet I know by their merry eyes
They are plotting and planning together
To take me by surprise.

A sudden rush from the stairway,
A sudden raid from the hall!
By three doors left unguarded
They enter my castle wall!

They climb up into my turret
O'er the arms and back of my chair;
If I try to escape, they surround me;
They seem to be everywhere.

They almost devour me with kisses,
Their arms about me entwine,
Till I think of the Bishop of Bingen
In his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine!

Do you think, O blue-eyed banditti,
Because you have scaled the wall,
Such an old mustache as I am
Is not a match for you all!

I have you fast in my fortress,
And will not let you depart,
But put you down into the dungeon
In the round-tower of my heart.

And there will I keep you forever,
Yes, forever and a day,
Till the walls shall crumble to ruin,
And moulder in dust away!

Chosen and read by Sue Hearn

Summoned by Bells – an excerpt by John Betjeman

“See how the wind has knocked the rambler down
And damaged my Gloxinias. Thank-you Maud.
And now if you will find my spectacles,
And put the ashtray there. That’s better. Ah....
Peace perfect peace.” My pain is nearly gone.
Yes, thank-you Maud. Is everything prepared?
He should be here by dinner. Keep it hot.
Put the potatoes on to boil in time
You know he’s very angry if they’re hard.
And put some water in his dressing-room –
The white enamel jug below the stairs –
You know he’s very angry if there’s none.
And put the drinks out on the silver tray,
And see the whiskey is decanted, Maud:
You know he’s very angry if it’s not.
And let me know when Master John is back.
Oh what it is to run a country house!
Certainly not a holiday for me.
The constant worry simply knocks me up;
Our Doctor Blaber used to say,
“Bessie, I fear is rather delicate.
What would he say if he saw me now –
Twenty-five years without a holiday
Housekeeping for a husband and a son.
Five thirty! Two more hours of quiet bliss.....

A motor broke the spell and that was that;
And here was home, and here the gate, and there
The Arrol-Johnston crawling down the lane.
And on the morning broke the storm.
“How often have I said the bacon’s cold?
Confound it Bess, Confound! When will they learn?”
Bang! Boom! His big fists set the cups a-dance,
The willow-pattern shivered on the shelves,
His coat-sleeve swept an ash-tray to the floor....
“Just down to breakfast, sir? You’re good enough
To honour us by coming down at ten!
Don’t fidget, boy. Attention when I speak!
As I was saying – now I look at you-
Bone-lazy, like my eldest brother Jack,
A rotten, low, deceitful little snob,
Yes, I’m in trade and proud of it I am!”

Black waves of hate went racing round the room;
My gorge was stuck with undigested toast.
And did this woman once adore this man?
And did he love her for her form and face?
I drew my arm across my eyes to hide
The horror in them at the wicked thoughts.
“My boy, it’s no good sulking. Listen here.
You’ll go to Bates and order me the car,
You’ll caddy for me on the morning round,
This afternoon you’ll help me dig for bait,
You’ll weed the lawn and, when you’ve finished that,
I’ll find another job for you to do.
I’ll keep you at it as I’ve kept myself –
I’ll have obedience! Yes, by God I will!”
“You damn well won’t! I’m going out today!”
I darted for the door. My father rose.
My saintly Mother, on her serious face
A regal look of dignified reproach.
“They both are in the wrong” – now seized her chance:
She waved an arm and dropped her cigarette.
“Come back!”, she cried, and heard her cry
As rang the martyred wife’s or mother’s cry
In many a Temple Thurston she had read
Or Phillip Gibbs: “He is your Father, John!”
I scraped my arm against the unstained oak
And slammed the door against my father’s weight –
And ran like mad and ran like mad and ran...
“I’m free, I’m free!” The open air was warm
And heavy with the scent of flowering mint,
And beetles waved on bending leagues of grass,
And all the baking countryside was kind.

Chosen and read by Simon Surtees

