

Poems in a Time of Coronavirus - Season Highlights



This anthology contains favourite poems and prose chosen from the selections read over the last 15 weeks as part of the St Paul's Friends 'Poems in a Time of Coronavirus' season

<i>Piece</i>	<i>Writer / Poet</i>	<i>Chosen by</i>	<i>Page</i>
The Small Celandine	William Wordsworth	Shelagh Allsop	1
Ozymandias	Percy Bysshe Shelley	Sam Hearn	2
My First Best Friend	Jack Prelutsky	Angus MacLaren	2
Ethel	Joyce Grenfell	Hillie MacLaren	3
Blackberry-Picking	Seamus Heaney	Peter Capell	4
Digging	Seamus Heaney	Katharine Makower	5
Victorian samplers	Joan Pomfret	Victoria Lynch	6
Miracle on St David's Day	Gillian Clarke	Mary Barnard	7
The BlueBell Wood	Felix Dennis	Elizabeth Barnard	8
The Gnu Song	Flanders & Swann	Jackie Rayer	9
A Psalm of Life	H W Longfellow	Carolyn Ashford-Russell	10
Musée des Beaux Arts	W H Auden	Sue Hearn	11
Fern Hill	Dylan Thomas	Simon Surtees	12



***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



Poem originally read by Jackie Rayer and chosen as a highlight by Shelagh Allsop

***Ozymandias* by Percy Bysshe Shelley**

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away

Poem originally read by Sue Hearn and chosen as a highlight by Sam Hearn

***My First Best Friend* by Jack Prelutsky**

My first best friend is Awful Ann—
she socked me in the eye.
My second best is Sneaky Sam—
he tried to swipe my pie.
My third best friend is Max the Rat—
he trampled on my toes.
My fourth best friend is Nasty Nell—
She almost broke my nose.

My fifth best friend is Ted the Toad—
he kicked me in the knee.
My sixth best friend is Grumpy Gail—
she's always mean to me.
My seventh best is Monster Moe—
he often plays too rough.
That's all the friends I've got right now—
I think I've got enough.

Poem originally read by Carolyn Ashford-Russell and chosen as a highlight by Angus MacLaren

Ethel by Joyce Grenfell

I don't understand Ethel.
I don't, I don't really.
She's one of my very best friends,
Just about the best, nearly.
She's an awfully nice girl, Ethel is,
Dainty and refined,
I mean she'd never do or say
Anything unkind.
But get her inside a stadium
And she seems to go out of her mind.

'KILL HIM!' she yells, 'KNOCK HIS BLOCK
OFF!'
At ice hockey or football or what.
'KILL 'EM!' she yells, turning purple,
'KILL THE PERISHING LOT!'
'SH-SH!' I say, 'ETHEL!'
'SH-SH!' and I die of shame.
'KILL HIM AND BASH HIS TEETH IN HIS FACE!'
She says,
And calls him a dirty name.

I don't understand Ethel,
I don't, I don't truly.
She is always gentle and sweet,
Never a bit unruly.
She's an awfully shy girl, Ethel is,
Wouldn't say boo to a goose.
You wouldn't think she ever could
Suddenly break loose.
But get her inside a stadium
And her face turns a terrible puce.

'THROW HIM OUT OF THE WINDER!' she yells,
And her eyes go a terrible red.
'SWIPE 'EM!' she says, looking cheerful,
'SWIPE 'EM UNTIL THEY'RE DEAD!'
'SH-SH!' I say, 'ETHEL!'
'SH-SH!' and I nearly die,
'SWIPE HIM AND GRIND HIS FACE IN THE
MUD!'
She says,
'AND PUT YOUR THUMB IN HIS EYE!'

I don't understand Ethel,
I don't, I don't, really.
She's one of my very best friends,
Just about the best, nearly.
She's and awfully quiet girl, Ethel is,
That's why I never see
What makes her carry on like that,
Noisy as can be.
Then last Saturday down at the stadium
Well... it suddenly happened to me.

'BREAK HIS SILLY NECK!' I yells, 'IRON HIM
OUT!'
Well, Ethel was startled at that.
'IRON HIM!' I says, feeling lovely,
'IRON HIM UNTIL HE'S FLAT!'
'OOH', I says, 'ETHEL!'
'OOH', and I did feel queer.
Then she grinned, and we both of us gave a yell
'BITE A BIT OUT OF HIS EAR!'

Poem originally read by Simon Surtees and chosen as a highlight by Hillie MacLaren



***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.

Poem originally read by Simon Surtees and chosen as a highlight by Peter Capell

***Digging* by Seamus Heaney**

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

Poem originally read by Sue Hearn and chosen as a highlight by Katharine Makower

Victorian samplers by Joan Pomfret (published in Embroidery Magazine in 1957)

About a hundred years ago
Most little girls were taught to sew
A Sampler ... Quietly sitting there
With patient needle, braided hair,
They worked long rows of cross-stitch trees
And alphabets, and things like these...
But who, I wonder, chose the lines
Which always finished their design?
We fade as Leaves upon a Tree
Stitch little Abigail, aged three;
For Charity, at four (poor lass!)
'Twas: We are Cut Down like the Grass.
And ... more ambitious ... May I go
With Courage through this Vale of Woe,
The Path of Duty never shirk.
Rebecca Green, aged five. Her work.
The Sabbath Day was made for Man,
This came from six year-old Joanne,
Who also stitched this further truth:
Man's heart is Evil from his Youth...
Too soon, too soon the Moment fell,
He had not Time to say Farewell
But swiftly sped his Way to Heaven
And that from Sarah Jane, aged Seven!

At eight, a Hymn (though far from gay)
Became the order of the day,
And Ruth in 1843
Left these lines for Posterity...
In the Churchyard are many Graves,
Above our Friends are the green grass waves,
They cannot hear us speak or tread,
Or come to Church ... for they are Dead.
I could go on At nine and ten
They really had a good time then
With : Dash thy Foot against a Stone...
Man does not Live by Bread alone ...
And even: With Thy Sheep, O Place Me,
Nor among the Goats debase Me (!)

* * *

I'm glad I didn't learn to sew
About a hundred years ago!

Poem originally read by Jackie Rayer and chosen as a highlight by Victoria Lynch



***Miracle on St David's Day* by Gillian Clarke**

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude
- The Daffodils - William Wordsworth

An afternoon yellow and open-mouthed
with daffodils. The sun treads the path
among cedars and enormous oaks.
It might be a country house, guests strolling,
the rumps of gardeners between nursery
shrubs.

I am reading poetry to the insane.
An old woman, interrupting, offers
as many buckets of coals as I need.
A beautiful chestnut-haired boy listens
entirely absorbed. A schizophrenic

on a good day, they tell me later.
In a cage of first March sun a woman
sits not listening, not seeing, not feeling.
In her neat clothes, the woman is absent.
A big mild man is tenderly led

to his chair. He has never spoken.
His labourer's hands on his knees, he rocks
gently to the rhythms of the poems.
I read to their presences, absences,
to the big, dumb labouring man as he rocks.

He is suddenly standing, silently,
huge and mild, but I feel afraid. Like slow
movement of spring water or the first bird
of the year in the breaking darkness,
the labourer's voice recites The Daffodils'.

The nurses are frozen, alert; the patients
seem to listen. He is hoarse but word-perfect.
Outside the daffodils are still as wax,
a thousand, ten thousand, their syllables
unspoken, their creams and yellows still.

Forty years ago, in a Valleys school,
the class recited poetry by rote.
Since the dumbness of misery fell
he has remembered there was a music
of speech and that once he had something to say.

When he's done, before the applause, we observe
the flowers' silence. A thrush sings
and the daffodils are aflame.

Poem originally read by Katharine Makower and chosen as a highlight by Mary Barnard

***The BlueBell Wood* by Felix Dennis**

We walked within an ancient wood
Beside the Heart-of-England way
Where oak and beech and hazel stood,
Their leaves the pale shades of May.

By bole and bough, still black with rain,
The sunlight filtered where it would
Across a glowing, radiant stain—
We stood within a bluebell wood!

And stood and stood, both lost for words,
As all around the woodland rang
And echoed with the cries of birds
Who sang and sang and sang and sang...

My mind has marked that afternoon
To hoard against life's stone and sling;
Should I go late, or I go soon,
The bluebells glow— the birds still sing.

Poem originally read by Victoria Lynch and chosen as a highlight by Elizabeth Barnard

The Gnu Song by Flanders & Swann

A year ago, last Thursday, I was strolling in the zoo
When I met a man who though he knew the lot
He was laying down the law about the habits of baboons
And the number of quills a porcupine has got
So I asked him: What's that creature there?
He answered "Nyeh, h'it's a h'elk"
I might have gone on thinking that was true
If the animal in question hadn't put that chap to shame
And remarked "I h'ain't a h'elk, I'm a g-nu"

I'm a g-nu
I'm a g-nu
The g-nicest work of g-nature in the zoo
I'm a g-nu
How d'you do?
You really ought to k-know wa-who's wa-who
I'm a g-nu
Spelt G-N-U
I'm g-not a camel or a kangaroo
So let me introduce
I'm g-neither man nor moose
Oh, g-no, g-no, g-no - I'm a g-nu

I had taken furnished lodgings down at Rustington-on-Sea
Whence I travelled on to Ashton-under-Lyne it was actually
And the second night I stayed there I was wakened from a dream
Which I'll tell you all about some other time
Among the hunting trophies on the wall above my bed
Stuffed and mounted was a face I thought I knew
A bison? No, it's not a bison
An okapi? S'unlikely
Could it be a hartebeest?
I seemed to hear a voice

I'm a g-nu
I'm a g-nu
...

Youtube clip: [I'm a g-nu](#)

Poem originally read, and re-visited, by Jackie Rayer

***A Psalm of Life* by H W Longfellow**

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,— act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.

Chosen and read by Carolyn Ashford-Russell

***Musée des Beaux Arts* by W H Auden**

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse

Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Poem originally read by Sheila White and chosen as a highlight by Sue Hearn



The Fall of Icarus – Pieter Bruegel the Elder

***Fern Hill* by Dylan Thomas**

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green,
 The night above the dingle starry,
 Time let me hail and climb
 Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves
 Trail with daisies and barley
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
 In the sun that is young once only,
 Time let me play and be
 Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
 And the sabbath rang slowly
 In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
 And playing, lovely and watery
 And fire green as grass.
 And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
 Flying with the ricks, and the horses
 Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
 The sky gathered again
 And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
 Out of the whinnying green stable
 On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
 In the sun born over and over,
 I ran my heedless ways,
 My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
 Before the children green and golden
 Follow him out of grace,

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
 In the moon that is always rising,
 Nor that riding to sleep
 I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
 Time held me green and dying
 Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

Poem originally read by Catherine Jessop and chosen as a highlight by Simon Surtees