



A Poetry Reading for St Katherine's

by

Rogan Wolf

on

National Poetry Day

Thursday October 4th 2018

The theme for National Poetry Day in 2018 was "change" and this collection reflects that theme, to some extent. The majority of the poems are by the reader, Rogan Wolf, but the collection includes examples of work by a number of other poets too. Some of these examples were taken from a project Rogan runs called "Poems for...the wall" - See <https://poemsforthewall.org>



Reaching for Words

Reaching for words
is like searching the Earth
for stones
and then shaping them
one after another
into a path.

Rogan Wolf
September 2016



Words

What are words for ?
If to connect us
they have to be pristine
carriageways for truth-telling.
We have to tend and train our words
to be as sound and life-giving
as the Earth.

For like God
words stand at our mercy.
They can be twisted
to the vicious will
turned
into mirrors of the corrupted self.

And those who would smash Creation
and burn and dismember our children
speak words
of terrible skill.

Rogan Wolf
September 2015



Suddenly the Universe

That first-born breath
is the beginning of Time.
Suddenly the universe
falls into place
and all our sentences rhyme.

From star-dust we come
and to star-dust shall return
but suddenly the universe
falls into place
and all of life is re-born.

We spring from pain
to an immeasurable joy.
Suddenly the universe
falls into place
resolved in that infant cry.

*Rogan Wolf
February 06*

This poem about child birth needs to be sung to a tune a bit reminiscent of plainsong.



An evening with my adult sons

We met and came to table today
between us the rush of aortal blood
beyond us leaves streaming in the wind

and disturbed a memory
of similar moments flung from time
like pictures stacked through generations :

the air beats like blood
and leaves roar outside the window
and lives still meshed yet tend away.

*Rogan Wolf
September 2008*



from Fingerprints

Look at how we start, like fortune-tellers,
at the hands. Here by the window,
where ward meets world, I examine
this man's, turn them over like found leaves....
A tree surgeon's hands, he says, my skin
pressed in to other life, its bark and blood,
just like you doc I bet, your fingerprints
handed to others... I think our bodies
are this, that we merge really, collide
and become the breath of others. Here,
he says, go on, have a whiff. My fingers
drum his chest. Did you hear those sounds,
he asks, from that comet, like whale song,
mermaids? The ship they landed,
its name, what, Philae? - it means end,
or place's edge, some frontier where
things meet... I shine a light in his ears. Hard
now to tell which of us is speaking, where
the voice comes from. One of us says thank you.
I go to wash my hands but, seeing them
in the water, stop, turn, return to him.

Sam Guglani



I Send Greetings



I send greetings from this place
to my neighbours across the water
I bid them welcome to my mind
I bid them welcome to our future

and I grieve that in the present
some people on this small island
have been bewildered and ill-led
into thinking water can be wall

and a little and invented “we”
can be a separate, better home
than true connection, I to Thee,
each frail on a cliff-edge, sharing the sea.

*Rogan Wolf
October 2017*

Note : The building pictured above is St Aldhelm's Chapel, a tiny Norman building on the edge of a cliff in Studland, facing Normandy. I gave a poetry reading there last Autumn and wrote this poem for that reading. It is about Brexit.



On the Back of a Photograph

Hunched I make my way, uncertainly.
The other hand is only three years old.
An eighty-year-old hand and a three-year-old.
We hold each other. We hold each other tight.

János Pilinszky

*translated from the Hungarian
by Peter Jay, Crater, Anvil, 1978.
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Bell Ringing

dedicated to Gill, a “carer,” for whom the waiting room has often been her only refuge.

The English church bell
comes to rest in all its housings
mouth up
poised on the point of its crown.

To negotiate each bell
to that fragile station -
weight to sky in defiance of gravity -
the bell-ringer applies a force
to the dangling rope
just so -
exact and delicate -
not too much
not too little.

Get it wrong
and the great bell rolls over
and becomes something new -
a mass of stampeding pig metal -
as the rope streaks upwards
out of hand
and hell takes over
flooding the quiet horizons.

The attainment of perfect rest
is when chaos is held on a point ;
and poised
just so -
the moment cups you.

Here in the waiting room
I am cupped.
I am held aloft.
My poise is perfect here.
I am almost flying.

Rogan Wolf



from **Hyphen Loitering (with intent)**

...I believe today I almost met someone.
For just a few moments, possibly,
the whirring edge of me
disturbed some surface of attention.

Perhaps in time I'll risk being still enough
actually to meet a whole person.
I wonder would either of us survive
the awe and enormity of true encounter.

I loiter here between lines of thunder
poised for the sudden break
the momentary opening
my own hushed moment of interruption.....

Rogan Wolf



Waiting (at Risk)

Every room in the world -
the hall, the temple, the ward, the cell -
each variation of being in shelter

is a waiting room
an entry-port
a pause for the gathering of self

for a new phase of going further.
There's no real refuge
no relief from movement.

Here where we pause
offers no shelter.
In all our sanctuaries

we sit at risk. And here
we sit. And here always
is all that matters.

Our bright Earth
is a crowded waiting room
its roof unending,
pure, imperious.

It is awful to conceive
how many
have passed through here
and how many will follow.

Rogan Wolf
Spring 2000



Cloths of Heaven

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet :
But I, being poor, have only my dreams ;
I have spread my dreams under your feet ;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939)

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Poems for...all ages

<https://poemsforthewall.org>





Those who Fear to Sleep

Those who fear to sleep in case a monster
assails them in a dream,
are heroes in the making.

As the planet rolls, they approach a high destiny
and the monster, hiding, lies in wait.

Beowulf was notable for his prowess
in nailing monsters. He gripped and reduced them
on behalf of the tribe. It was the oldest of them -
a Worm of the Making -
who did for Beowulf in the end
and without a brave youth to help,
the old hero could not have pierced
those molten scales.

And World War Two
pitted most of humanity against the monstrous
and in six years of conflict
humanity only just won.

Our history bears witness to our dealings
with the monstrous and until now it is evident
we have only just won.

Rogan Wolf
May 31st 2018

Beowulf was the hero of an Anglo-Saxon epic poem. He duelled with monsters, but in his old age, the last one also killed him. It was a dragon. In Norse mythology, another word for dragon was "worm."



Midsummer, Tobago

Broad sun-stoned beaches.

White heat.

A green river.

A bridge,
scorched yellow palms

from the Summer-sleeping house
drowsing though August.

Days I have held,
days I have lost,

days that outgrow, like daughters,
my harbouring arms.

Derek Walcott (1930—2017)

from "Sea Grapes," 1976, published by Jonathan Cape. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.



The Magpie

People dying
learn suddenly to sing
rhapsodies steeped
in grief.

But dying is what
all of us are doing
all our lives and the rhapsodies I mean
seem to come in the last days
of dying, as if only then
do we finally wake up. So is life
mostly for sleeping? I look out
at bare trees this morning, the wet
on them shining, caught aslant
by the sun. A magpie flaps
busily across the open green
scattering water.

This is the magpie's moment.

So is the next.

It is early and still quiet.

Rogan Wolf
January 2016



The Red Kite

The motorway north
stoops
on Oxford.

At 80 we plummet
into the soft vale
of Middle Earth.

Precisely here
above the streaming lanes
the red kite

forks
and glories.
Perhaps it is watching us.

It does not know
the precarious majesty
of its stalking of the hill.

We
in our lanes
know well

our haste
and high-powered littleness.
Beware the red kite

its steady eye.
It hovers with bewildering grace.
It bides its time.

*Rogan Wolf
May/June05*



The swift

The swift flew low over the roof ridge
and then was gone
open mouthed to whatever the air might yield.
It was evening, time short,
but I heard the sound of the swift's head
splitting the air-waves above the roof.
It was like the howl from a fairground
as the ferris wheel accelerates
or on the helter skelter,
the cart dips and plummets.
It was like the sound surrounding
a slung stone or bullet head,
this howling of wind,
banshee, lost to the world.
What is it like to live inside a swift's head ?
As the swift never stops flying,
the air of its passing never stops howling.
And the swift shrieks as it dashes through
this larger and unending roar and dazzle.
The swift and the air it lives through
maintain lifelong their furious conversation,
through day and night *lifelong*
that frantic, dreadful ecstasy.

Rogan Wolf 02.07.2013

From a bird-book : "Swifts favour a life airborne, spending entire days aloft, feeding, mating and even sleeping on the wing. Swifts fly at least 560 miles a day during the nesting season and, in a single year, can cover around 125,000 miles. The Common Swift will cruise at 70 mph."



Oh Strange Animals

Oh strange animals
that care in us,

strange strong animals
lie waiting for an end in us,

oh dry animals
that mourn in us,

coiled serpents
are knotted in us,

rare butterflies
look for flowers in us,

dear dark animals
stretch dying in us,

bats fly in circles
in our caves,

oh strange animals
heal us.

David Hart

from "Setting the Poem to Words" Five Seasons Press 1998. Reprinted by permission of the author

Poems for... all ages

<https://poemsforthewall.org>



King's Fund





Moving House

(if I am to “move house” will it be me moving, or the house ?)

If my house were moving I'd run outside for safety.
But what if *outside* were moving, too ?
What if nothing is *not* moving, but all
and everywhere, all the time,
is being replaced by something radically new
at a speed forever accelerating, already break-neck ?
There's no house left, no world - only removals.
And my country, once the house
that mattered most, is moving at high speed
away from me.

*Rogan Wolf
February 2018*



Homecoming

It's as if the landscape
gathers you into its arms
making you
not just welcome here
but whole.

It has reached out and found
you where you alone
could not. You are never lost
among these contours.

They map your interior.
You are discovered here.

Rogan Wolf
April 2016



A Roman Engineer surveys the Downs

He stands on a ridge, a few miles inland.
Lush pasture close-cropped. Laden grey skies.
He throws his mind in a clean line
across the wide valley, its bunched cattle,
its burial mounds of bright chalk. He will string
ridge to ridge with his skillful cast of stone.
It will run straight across the green folds,
the slow undulations,
pressed deep, stone by stone.
He grips the young land,
its soft arms and shoulders.
Cities will be born
of this intimacy
between line and curve.

Rogan Wolf



Keeping Station

The late “Red Bishop” of Durham
proposed to several congregations
a new and active strategy for hope and creation

in the 3rd millennium. He called it
“Communities of Endurance”.

He meant that people who keep hearts open

in times of frenzy
are likely to find themselves outcasts -
a debilitating experience the human race can ill afford.

The keeping station
the holding on
go better when you’re not alone.

*Rogan Wolf
1998 (revised 2016)*

David Jenkins (1925-2016) was the Bishop of Durham. Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister of the UK during much of that time and he spoke out against her approach and some of her policies. He was much attacked by the right-wing press, as a result. They called him “The Red Bishop.”



Donald Reeves of St James's Piccadilly

From the pulpit of St James' Piccadilly
he harried those old-time images back to life.
Families drove for miles from the suburbs
to place themselves in his communion.

Why blame God
for things that go wrong for us ?
he asked one Christmas.
See it the other way round -
day and night
God is hanging from wrought nails
for our sakes.
When we succeed at last
in destroying Creation
we shall relieve God of His suffering.

And Reeves called on us that Christmas –
don't look to the main squares
the established landmarks
the rush of functionaries under the lights.
The hope of the world
wanders fugitive and fragile
in shadow
somewhere off.

Go there.
Give to it
all that is true in you.

*Rogan Wolf
June 2009*



from Gitanjali

The same stream of life
that runs through my veins
night and day
runs through the world
and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy
through the dust of the earth
in numberless blades of grass
and breaks into tumultuous waves
of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked
in the ocean cradle
of birth and of death
in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious
by the touch of this world of life.
And my pride
is from the life-throb of ages
dancing in my blood at this moment.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

Tagore wrote "Gitanjali" in his native Bengali. He then translated it into English. Soon afterwards he won the Nobel Prize for Literature.



A Larger Size of Time

(for Sylvia, aged 90)

Does the moment ever shrink
as if walls are closing in
or skyline flattening

to an endless level of sea ?

As hour by hour the years accumulate
it might be thought that the high

moments of your life must lose
altitude, intensity, extent. But I
question that conclusion.

Each moment I live
adds more of me to live *with*,
more collated time *within*

my living, more seeing
of what there is to see.

One day soon,

my moment
may not fit
me any more

and I'll have to wear
a larger size of time
to hold this larger me.

Rogan Wolf
August 2018



My way to you

I have forced a path through to your door
with neither direction nor address.
Had there been a road to this place
I would never have found you.

It has taken a life-time
to make my way to you.
No lesser discharge
would have reached this far.

I never once
knew where I was going.
Now that I've got here
my disorientation is complete.

Here at your door
I find myself at last.
Here at your door
there is nothing left of me.

Rogan Wolf
December 2005



No Travelling Light

Once you're over 60
there's no travelling light.

You have all this baggage
attached to you,

clattering alongside
like a huge family of tins.

When sometimes I dance
my tins come dancing with me

and then hundreds of green gremlins
come tumbling out of them

onto the floor.

I glare at my gremlins

and they scream -
E-E-E-E-E-E-H !!!!

and scuttle back under cover.

My tinned gremlins and I

are going on a long journey together
travelling heavy.



Word Play

May words work.
May mine
have looked you in the eye
and found you out
and worked on you right here.

Fraud and felon play
with words, seeking
only to deceive and buy
and force you to their will.

I must work a cleaner way
my words releasing you
to where you belong.

Words must truth-tell
sound the soul
make us well.

Rogan Wolf
September 2013