



# 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



## 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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*This poem was first published in Hungarian by Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1976. Reprinted by permission. The Hungarian original, with its English translation, are part of the “Poems for...the wall” collection of bilingual poems for public display.*



# 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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## 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.

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## 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*

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## 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-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*