50 Some Reflections on Love (August 2022)

Sadly, this will be the last dedicated ***poetry*** pondering as such. Posting the monthly essay has been useful for me, and great fun – but at times it's been quite difficult to keep up the steady momentum. This is certainly not the end – but I want to consider other angles of literature, not necessarily poetry, and not necessarily every single month. This may come as a relief to you, too! But poetry will still be a key interest as we march on together.

This month, I want to honour someone who prefers to stay more in the shadows, certainly as far as poetry is concerned. She is at the heart of all I do and live for – diligent also in trying to keep up with the monthly postings but preferring to read novels. Which is perfectly fine by me.

Here is a lovely poem, however, by Gillian Clarke, which chimes quite a bit, I think, with our own lives together:

My Box by Gillian Clarke

My box is made of golden oak,
my lover's gift to me.
He fitted hinges and a lock
of brass and a bright key.
He made it out of winter nights,
sanded and oiled and planed,
engraved inside the heavy lid
in brass, a golden tree.

In my box are twelve black books
where I have written down
how we have sanded, oiled and planed,
planted a garden, built a wall,
seen jays and goldcrests, rare red kites,
found the wild heartsease, drilled a well,
harvested apples and words and days
and planted a golden tree.

On an open shelf I keep my box.
Its key is in the lock.
I leave it there for you to read,
or them when we are dead,
how everything is slowly made,
how slowly things made me,
a tree, a lover, words, a box,
books and a golden tree.

I have to admit that I'm not the world's best when it comes to carpentry, but I have made, over the years, cupboards x3, a radiator cover, a goat shed, laid floors and made numerous bookshelves … nothing that my woodwork teacher at school would have held up to the public gaze and said, "Wow!", but… I tried, and they haven't all fallen to pieces, as far as I know. In this poem, which I find very moving, there's a simplicity of utterance, and the poem is shaped very carefully, just like the "box", which holds her writing, that here describes a shared life, built just as naturally as nests in nature which they seem to both hold dear. I like the key being in the totally unnecessary lock! Creating a family is not mentioned but the "them" could refer to their two children, an equally natural part of their shared lives. (Being discreet perhaps…?) The poem clearly works at a symbolic level throughout.

Here is another of her poems which I like immensely.

Miracle on St David's Day

(The poet writes - All you need to know about this poem is that it is a true story. It happened in the '70s, and it took me years to find a way to write the poem.)

'They flash upon that inward eye
which is the bliss of solitude'
(from 'The Daffodils' by 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 coal 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 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 flame.

It’s hard to follow that…

But poetry, as we know, doesn’t have to be solemn, or too serious. Most of the ones I write tend towards a certain flippancy, I’m afraid. Here are just a very few:

MUTUAL RIGHTS

In the twenty-second century, all cows
Were fitted with electronic fly-guards
Allowing 360° stun-capacity.

Flies, who by this time had formed outspoken unions,
Brought this matter before the World Council of Species
As a matter of urgency.

Of course, they said, they recognised the rights of cows
To added protection beyond the use of Tails, but flies in turn
Had rights - to be respected.

Billions, however, though later warned by personal Microbeepers,
Forgot to give them a wider berth (cows being still *very* attractive*),*
And were dropping…. like *flies.*

Notes on the Casuistry Of Birds

Take notes of
Their utter reasonableness,
As they chatter
        And shrilly gossip in the trees.
They wheedle and call -
        Beguilingly - in casuistical
        Blandishments
                Of sweet-talk:

"I'm yours, yours, yours for the asking,
Or taking. Let's screw!
        Screw!"
And amidst further snickering,
"Keep, keep, keep away, this is mine,
        Not yours! Go screw!
                Screw!"

CURE FOR STIFF NECKS

(cf Exodus 33 & 34)

Imagine the old fart
Staggering down the dry mountain,
Clutching his flat heavy blocks
A second time, *already*,
(Cursing, surely, but under his breath)
Like some recalcitrant ayatollah,
Who has worked out a burdensome *quid pro quo*
For his stiff-necked people
With the arms-dealing Superpower.

Those were days of wondrous initiation
And confab with the Lord:
Pillars of smoke stuff,
First name terms, almost;
Allowed to see the Back Parts, even,
Of the Almighty,
Whatever they looked like.
And the Voice droning on always,
"Keep taking the Tablets!"

Great Inventions No. 715 - “Memory Foam”

You know those mattresses? They’re made of foam?
What of them? Useless jobs compared to springs.
My partner reckons she gets really good sleep
On springs.
I know, but listen, here’s the thing,
See, foam, you get those big depressions, there,
Just where your great big bum has sunk.
Yeah, no good! S’why I tell you springs are best!
No, wait! But, what if we announce that all our beds
“Remember” you, they “recreate your form”?
You what? They’re just big hollows made from use,
Or *over-use*, more likely!
No, I have it!
The bed is “contoured to adapt itself to *you*!”
The mattress is “configured to your weight”
And senses with “intelligence” your shape.
It “memorises every occupant
And recreates their posture as they sleep,
To ensure the *most* relaxing slumber known
To man!” And we shall call it ‘Emma’ *
Why, bloody hell! That’s genius!
So, we charge them three times as much, the dozy prats,
For “clever” mattresses of flipping *foam*!?

** (The Emma Original is the best mattress you can buy right now. Bouncy but buoyant, you won't sink into this foam mattress – and you won't be disturbed by a restless partner either. It's extremely comfortable, supportive, and should suit most body shapes and sleeping styles.*
REASONS TO BUY
+
Exceptionally comfortable and supportive
+
Especially good for sleepers who move a lot
REASONS TO AVOID -
Some may find it a little warm
BY JULIA SAGAR SEPTEMBER 10, 2019)

I've taught so many poems, looking for the serious 'critical' angle, but I also enjoy 'bouncing off' some of the more classical stuff I've enjoyed teaching. The originals (which I love, by the way) can be found in the Appendix. These are just harmless fun to relieve the odd lesson, perhaps, when students were furiously writing their very serious 'critical' responses to 'high' poetry. So, here in no particular order…

THE EMPEROR OF LYONS MAID
(Apologies to Wallace Stevens)

Let the carver of Family Size
Grasp the knife and slice the prize:
Neapolitan - vanillas, pinks and chocs,
For boys in shorts and girls in frocks,
Near the sea and by the sand drift is
My memory of the Nineteen Fifties.

Then fill the Coke to the glass's brim,
May the gods above be invoked to aid;
Let eat just be finale of swim,
The only Emperor is the Emperor of Lyons Maid.

Certain of the Team
(Keats' "Ode to Autumn" Revisited)

Certain of the team, it seems to us, have
Let down the side, given cause for
Disappointment. Guys, you all know to what
I am referring: sunset, barrèd clouds,
Stubble-plains, lambs bleating over
The hilly bourn - and we were all assembled
Down by the river, dodging those
Damned swallows.

Now, I was told it was *mainly* the younger males,
And I have to say there was considerable
Roistering in mid-flight with certain females
(Who shall remain nameless). This introduced
A note of jamboree, knees-up, let's-make-
Whoopee, into the general *hum*. Guys, it jarred!
The sun had set, right? Winter *was* appreciably
Drawing near.

Well, guys, let's be quite clear about this one, shall we?
Notice is hereby served on *all* gnats that the
Aforementioned *shebang* ambience, which might
Be misconstrued for songs of spring, is *out*,
And, at the very next group choir practice,
We go about the old swallow-avoidance
With all our mournful, wailing business, as
Per usual.

Stopping By Woods

Whose woods these are, I *think* I know,
But I forget with all this snow,
And all the darkness makes it hard
When I'm alone and off my guard.

My horse has better memory cells;
Look at him shake his harness bells.
"Keep all those promises!" they said,
But which? They've gone clean out my head.

I know that I've got things to do,
But what? and where? I wish I knew.
It's hard to deal with memory loss,
When you've got woods and snow to cross. *(Apologies to Bob Frost)*

I'm sorry – I have lots of these… so I think I'll stop there. Oh, all right, here's one more:

(This Is Just To Say
I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold)

(William Carlos Williams)

(This Is Just To Say
that you are an ass-hole
they weren't your plums and this is not
the first time items on my shelf
of the icebox have gone missing
like that custard tart
last week which had a sizeable segment
missing

and while we're on the subject
your shelf is littered with
small hunks of decaying cheese
in silver foil, mouldy pâté
and half-opened tins that are frankly
off

so how about joining me for
'*boeuf en croûte'* this evening
instead and you getting some more
plums for
dessert?)

As a teacher, you sometimes wonder how pupils turn out.

WILLIAM?

William?
Yes I was his schoolmaster;
Small country grammar, under-resourced as
Always. Sharp lad, though – head always stuck
In a book. Strict? Well, one had to be. Tended to play
To the gallery, somewhat. Quite the mimic! No Latin –
Still less Greek, not that he seemed to care
That much.

Father?
Wasn't he a bit down
At heels? There was that business later,
Getting a local girl in the family way. Shot-
Gun wedding, I think. Three kids before you knew it.
Off to London then to make his fortune. *Treading the boards*.
Usual story, I suppose. Don't know how he
Turned out.

And for my adorable Vicki, here are just a few scribbles from our life together:

First Swimming Lesson (Gillingham, Dorset c. 1995)

Across the dingy paving slabs from the pool
side, we watched our three lined up
and eager, as Mrs Bennet,
elderly, calm, chain-smoking
in her navy tracksuit, led the
class through their splashing efforts.

Once we saw a little hand raised
(he was too small to peer over the edge)
in greeting to us -
not drowning, but waving.

My Crap-Detector Is My Lovely Wife

My crap-detector is my lovely wife:
Crap she catches at the door.
She lines the kids up; I hold the knife
To scrape the shoes - that's *my* chore.

Crap, too, of another sort she catches:
Pretension, idiocy, selfishness she spots
And laughs or rages - at any rate she matches -
For she, in her lovely way, is totally crap-free, and
generous - lots.

You

So entirely warm and real
that words on the page seem
unrelated
to your voice or scent
or breathing

to your laughter your mimicry
or your generosity
to your anxieties and extravagances
or your constant thoughtfulness
and your beauty

though fleetingly
and forever
they may just
recall
You

APPENDIX

The Emperor of Icecream by Wallace Stevens

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

I love this poem. This is an old-fashioned southern states (USA) household with poor servants. It may be an elderly (black?) housekeeper who has died – her poverty is shown by her bare, “horny” feet and the “deal” dresser (deal is very cheap pine and the dresser lacks a knob). To mark her passing the great luxury of “ice-cream” is being prepared. I guess the “roller of big cigars” to be a black ‘butler’ of some sort. All the details are tawdry and impoverished, but death is being marked and collectively celebrated. Fantasy is dispelled (“Let be be finale of seem”) and Death is the “Emperor” – ambivalently bringing goodies in its train. ‘It’s an ill wind…etc.’

I think everyone knows the Frost poem. It also creates a haunting ambivalence of life and death. It takes place just before Christmas, but there’s an inner loneliness in the poem and the persona seems to be fascinated with the beauty and emptiness of the woods. To stay there any longer would be dangerous, and even the horse is uneasy. It comes as no surprise to know that Frost suffered from depression for a lot of his life – something he shared with his friend Edward Thomas. (See my posting No.1 four years ago.)

Stopping By Woods by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

TO AUTUMN by John Keats

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
  Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
  With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
  And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
    To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
  With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
    For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
  Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
  Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
  Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
    Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
  Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
  Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?
  Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
  And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
  Among the river sallows, borne aloft
    Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
  Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
  The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
    And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.