

Poetry Group - Report by Elizabeth Long

After last month's session on 'Loss', we turned our attention to the more cheerful theme of 'Joy'. The poems chosen were varied, covering joy and happiness, as well as simply appreciating the transitory moments of joy in our life.

We began by being entertained by a folk song / poem, sung by Richard Thompson. Sumer Is Icumen In ('Summer Is a-Coming In' / 'Summer Has Arrived') is a mediaeval English song dating from at least the 13th century, said to be one of the oldest folk songs. Fortunately, we were provided with a modern English translation.

We all enjoyed 'Joy of Socks' by Wendy Cope, a cheerful poem celebrating the warmth and importance of socks, as the following lines explain:

"Nice warm socks,

Nice warm socks –

We should celebrate them

Ask a toe! Toes all know"

A companion piece, 'The Sorrow of Socks' had to follow. We all know how socks disappear!

"Some socks are loners –

They can't live in pairs."

Later on in the session we heard 'Swim Right Up to Me' by Katherine Pierpoint, another fun poem beginning,

"I first learnt to swim at home in my father's study
On the piano stool, planted on the middle of
the rug."

Poems by Khalil Gibran, W.B. Yeats, Emily Brontë, Seamus Heaney, and Christina Rossetti all proved fascinating and insightful about our topic. Mary Oliver's 'Wild Geese', chosen by two of our group, made the point that no matter what you are going through in life there is always something, particularly in nature, that makes you stop and think, accepting your place in the "family of things".

We finished with an apt choice, reflecting on the nature of happiness. 'Happiness' by Jane Kenyon, an American poet who fought depression and illness for much of her life. Observing and absorbing small miracles in everyday life, her poems grapple with fundamental questions of human existence. This was a particularly thoughtful, reflective, poem on the nature of happiness.

"There's just no accounting for happiness,

or the way it turns up like a prodigal

who comes back to the dust at your feet

having squandered a fortune far away."

We all felt that this was a good collection of poems, covering many aspects of joy and happiness, while giving us pause for thought, reflection and memories of happy times.

Poetry Group Meeting - Report by Mike Catling

The concise Oxford Dictionary defines a 'garment' as 'an article of dress, the outward and visible covering of anything.' The January meeting of the Poetry Group chose 'Garments' as its theme that led to a broad spectrum of poems from the clergy surplice to hats via Dacca Gauzes! The readings took us from the outward and the visible into the inner meanings and implications of why we wear what we wear.

Robert Herrick's poem 'Delight in Disorder' invited us to consider 'A careless shoe-string, in whose tie / I see a wild civility.' This led to a discussion ranging from how many ways you can wear a school uniform to the confrontational, aggressive dress-uniform of the punk.

In contrast, David Scott reminds us that the clergy surplice is 'by law / decent and comely . . . we have put these garments on for centuries,' he writes. However, there is a darker element in this poem written from a personal perspective in which the surplice is 'put on often in dread,' and whilst such garments persist 'we wither and crease inside them.' What is outward and visible may belie the feelings underneath this garment of some who wear them.

This darker element is also in evidence in the poem 'The Dacca Gauzes' by Agha Shahid Ali. The gauzes were the finest cloth used in making wedding saris as part of the bride's dowry. His mother had such a one, now only a memory. Coupled to this memory is another in which the poet tells us the British colonialists systematically amputated the hands of the local weavers and 'the looms of Bengal [were] silenced // and the cotton shipped raw / by the British to England.' Something my history teacher never told us about in school!

There is space to give only reference to one other poem shared with the group, namely Stevie Smith's 'My Hat'. This is a complex poem in which parental control appears to be uppermost in the opening lines. 'Mother said if I wore this hat / I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap.' Mother's intentions backfire and the poet ends up on a (metaphorical?) desert island with her hat as accomplice. 'Am I glad to be here?' she asks. Her answer is 'Yes, well, I am / it's nice to be rid of Father, Mother and the young man.' Maybe this is a salutary tale for those parents who wish to push their children into particular life choices without considering the desires of their children. Editor's note: Stevie Smith was an idiosyncratic poet and illustrator, so this is an image which she drew to accompany her poem.

