

Poetry Group June Meeting, report by Mike Catling

What is it like to experience exile in one's life? Our June meeting brought together a wide range of poetry from those who had such an experience.

There were familiar laments of being exiled from one's homeland, perhaps by necessity or by force, but also poems by poets rarely heard of or unknown. Robert Burns, a familiar name to many, tells us that, 'My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here // My heart's in the Highlands wherever I go.' The Hebrew Psalmist (PS 137) remembers that, 'By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept // for there our captors asked us for songs // How can we sing the songs of the Lord in a foreign land?' In contrast, W B Yeats decides to return to a place he either remembers or longs to go to in *The Lake of Innisfree*: 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree // I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore / While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey / I hear it in the deep heart's core.'

War and/or foreign occupation can be the cause of physical or mental exile. The poet, Li-Young Lee and her family fled their home in Djakarta, where she was born in 1957, due to anti-Chinese sentiment and eventually settled in the United States seven years later. She remembers her mother singing 'and my grandmother joins her // I've never been in Peking, or the Summer Palace // but I love to hear it sung // Both women have begun to cry / But neither stops her song.' Equally one can feel exiled in their own land as a result of foreign invasion or occupation. In Pamela Mordecai's poem *Lament of An Arawak Child* we read that 'strange men came and took this land / and plundered all we had // They made my people into slaves / they worked us to the bone / they battered us and tortured us / and laughed to hear us groan.'

The First World War was the subject of many poems, and one of the best known is by Rupert Brooke, who writes in *The Soldier*, 'If I should die, think only this of me / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England.' Edward Thomas writes of being exiled from friendship as a result of this war. In his poem *The Sun Used to Shine*, he remembers it doing so 'while we two walked / Slowly together, paused and started / Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked / As either pleased . . .'

There is not the space to speak of Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer's poem *Letter to the Parts of Me I Have Tried to Exile*, which expresses a healing journey of welcoming all aspects of ourselves, Eaven Boland's *Quarantine* that tells the story of a husband and wife who left the workhouse in the winter of 1847 who both died of cold and hunger on their journey north, and Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* that asks, 'Won't you help to sing / These songs of freedom.' A salutary request when we think of so many held in exiled captivity either distant from their homeland or within their own land by occupying forces.