

# BESHARA MAGAZINE

*Unity in the Contemporary World*

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## POEMS FOR THESE TIMES: A REFLECTION

*Jane Clark and Barbara Vellacott review the poetry series we presented during the Covid-19 lockdown, March – June 2020*



Danny Wertheimer plays guitar and sings to his neighbours from his balcony two days after California's Governor Gavin Newsom implemented a state wide 'stay at home order' to the state's 40 million residents.

Photograph: REUTERS/Kate Munsch TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY, March 21 2020

When the crisis caused by the global pandemic of Covid-19 began to hit Europe and USA in March, those of us working on the Magazine felt that we wanted to make a response to this unprecedented situation. We came up with the idea of a series of weekly poems, which turned out to be four-

teen in number, ending on 28 June as the lockdown began to ease. In this article, Jane Clark and Barbara Vellacott, who edited the series, reflect upon the experience and present one final offering – 'Touched by an Angel' by Maya Angelou.







**W**ithout going outside you may know  
the whole world. (Lao Tsu)

Poetry engages the imagination, and can touch us deeply, body and soul; it can bring us to a sense of our common humanity. Therefore we could also say:

*Through poetry we may know the whole world.*

The aim of the fourteen 'Poems for These Times' was to connect imaginatively and compassionately with what humanity has been going through during the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, and to offer some spiritual help and support. We were not alone in thinking that poetry had a special role to play. As the UK lockdown started in March, it seemed to be everywhere – on the radio and TV, flooding into our inboxes from friends and colleagues – as people sought the guidance of perennial truths in the strange new world we found ourselves in. Poetry is not the only way to explore such things, of course, but in our multi-cultural and largely secular society it can have a universal appeal that other sources, such as religious writings, no longer achieve.

Signs across the city of London encourage people to stay at home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Photograph: Jeff Gilbert / Alamy Stock Photo

Poem 4: Cape Town, South Africa. Children put on face masks donated by Mr Henri Ludski, a local printer, at a shopping centre in Makhaza, Khayelitsha,

after the government declared a 21 day COVID-19 lockdown. Photograph: Roger Sedres / Alamy Live News, 30th March, 2020







Poem 7: Manuas, Brazil, the Parque Taruma Cemetery. Aerial view of a new section which has been opened during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the foreground, cemetery workers unload one of several coffins from a truck into a single grave. Photograph: Michael Dantas / AFP via Getty Images

We started with a selection of a dozen or so poems that we felt had this universal quality, and decided to choose from them flexibly according to what we sensed was the mood of the moment. ‘Pandemic’ by Lyn Ungar was an obvious choice to start with. One of the first poems to circulate on the internet, it was written precisely for the times and struck a note of creative and sacred possibility. We wanted to offer just one poem each week, so that people could really stay with what was offered in a contemplative way. We also decided to present them with the minimum of commentary to allow readers to uncover meanings for themselves and relate them to their own situation.

## A Unified Vision

Beyond the fundamental requirement that a poem had to be strong enough – and profound enough – to stand alone,

there were some guiding criteria for selection. At the most basic level, poems had to be in English for the Magazine’s worldwide audience. This occasionally conflicted with our desire to have poems from other cultures, because translations sometimes do not read well. We found some lovely, pertinent sentiments, for instance, in the work of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, but any poems we found that were right for our theme, while they no doubt sound beautiful in Bengali, seemed rather banal in the English versions. We did, however, discover some wonderful translations, such as the extract from Rilke’s ‘Tenth Elegy’ by Stephen Mitchell, the meditation by Lao Tzu, translated by Jane English and Paul E. Losensky, and Sunil Sharma’s rendering of the *Ghazals* of classical Indian poet, Amir Khusrau.

A linked consideration was that pieces had to be poetry (without entering into definitions of what that is) rather than teachings, or aphorisms. That is, they had to read musically. We looked at a great many texts from the mystical traditions of the world, but in most cases failed to find sufficiently lyrical passages. As the series developed, we found that we naturally aimed for a balance of qualities week to week, and ended up with what we hope was a pleasing variety of poetic styles – the weighty music of John Milton in *Paradise Lost* contrasting with the lyrical tone of Eliza-





Poem 11: Dallas Texas. Following the death of George Floyd on 25 May, Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban stands with Rev. Stacey Brown and Dallas Police Chief Rene Hall (right) as they gather in prayer to ask for justice against racism. Photograph: 31 May, 2020, Smiley N. Pool / Staff Photographer

beth Jennings in ‘Song of Time’, and the Jamaican rap style of Benjamin Zephaniah’s ‘The Old Truth’.

The most important criterion, however, was the need to be true to a unified vision of human experience, holding together both ‘happiness’ and ‘the dark’ in our overall picture. The word *beshara* has the meaning of ‘good news’ and embodies a fundamentally optimistic approach both to the world and to human nature. But a comprehensive vision has to encompass the felt experience of suffering as well as the final reality of compassion. Therefore we looked for poems that did not flinch from acknowledging the existential dilemmas we were facing – and will continue to face – during the pandemic.

We chose Czeslaw Milos’s poem ‘Before Majesty’ because it holds together faith and anguish in a stark and moving way, and were pleased to discover from the very positive response that our readers were with us on this matter. We got equally appreciative reactions to Jane Hirshfield’s ‘The Weighing’ and Rilke’s ‘Extract from the Tenth

Elegy’ with its haunting line: ‘How we squander our hours of pain’, whilst Khusrav holds both beauty and human suffering in his exquisite ‘Ghazal 1836’:

*... why else does  
Khusrav begin  
each early morning  
to sing and lament  
like the nightingale.*

Death of course is the great issue which has confronted us throughout the coronavirus crisis. We thought much about this. There are plenty of poems about death – the final, undeniable end of human life. But so many deaths at once can shock the collective human psyche, and we asked: what can poetry offer? Musing over this, our attention was drawn to ‘The Dead’ by Rupert Brooke, written in the context of mass deaths during the First World War. It seemed to sound a true note for now. There is life and the experience of loss – ‘all this is ended’ – as well as acceptance. This poem, together with Ted Hughes’ ‘A Green Mother’, with its tender and earth-oriented framing of death and its ‘aftertaste’, may remind us that death, however unwelcome, unjust or untimely, is not the worst thing that can happen to a human being.



## Responding to the Moment

Our task at the beginning of each week was to respond sensitively and intuitively to ‘the times’ as they manifested both in the external world and personally, as we underwent the journey through lock-down, crisis and gradual emergence. We soon had to extend our initial list, embarking upon new searches as different, and sometimes unexpected, themes emerged, such as the fluidity of time (Elizabeth Jennings ‘Song of Time’); our mutual dependence (D.H. Lawrence’s ‘Trust’, and the experience of subtle connection which is expressed so beautifully in ‘The Instrument’ by Kathleen Raine:

*... it may be that soul extends  
Organs of sense  
Tuned to waves here scarcely heard, or only  
Heard distantly, in dreams...*

The most vivid example of this process was Poem 11, for which we were planning to use Stevie Smith’s pithy ode on friendship (see below) at a time when, in Europe at least, people began to meet again in the open air. But then on 25 May, George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis, and

‘Black Lives Matter’ dominated the headlines all over the world. We spent two days trawling through our books and the internet for a suitable offering from an African-American poet, but in the end, after one of us woke up early in the morning with a clear intuition about Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, we went for the pure lament expressed by Adam at the end of that great epic of the human condition – ‘O miserable mankind, to what fall // Degraded’ – linking it to contemporary events with a picture of a prayer group in Dallas, Texas.

We tried to maintain a broad vision when choosing the poems, encompassing different ethnicities and cultures, the spiritual traditions of East and West, classical and modern, men and women. But although our researches were careful, they were inevitably far from exhaustive and reflected the limits of our own knowledge. We prioritised what we felt were appropriate poetic responses, and found ourselves using the accompanying pictures – which the magazine format requires – to show the global nature of the pandemic. The pictures also allowed us to touch on some themes which were not covered by the poems – the drop in pollution levels, the closing of communal places of worship, the heroism of health workers, etc.

Finding these images proved far from straightforward, however. As soon as a picture is put next to a poem an interpretation creeps in, which can limit the poem or prescribe a response. We had a few struggles and debates over these choices, both between the two of us and with our visuals editor, Judy Kearns, who was an essential part of the process throughout. We hope that keeping the photographs strictly related to human experience of the pandemic legitimised their use with poems also chosen especially ‘for these times’. Looking back, it seems that they form their own kind of record of an extraordinary period.

## The Ones that Got Away

We have looked at many wonderful poems over the last four months. As the series progressed, we also received many suggestions from readers, some of which they had written themselves, which we very much appreciated. We could not use all of them, and it is not necessarily a reflection on the value of a poem that it did not make into the series. Some poems that ticked all the boxes were left out because they were already well known and circulating widely, such as Pablo Neruda’s ‘Keeping Quiet’ and Gerald Manley Hopkins’ ‘God’s Grandeur’. Some we felt were not accessible enough, like ‘Angel of the Abyss’ by Michael Symmons Roberts, or contained references that, without discussion, could be misleading if one did not know the context, such as ‘One Foot in Eden’ by Edwin Muir. For some, their ‘moment’ just did not arrive. Of these, there is a lingering regret that we did not manage to include Stevie Smith’s short poem on friendship –

*The pleasures of friendship are exquisite.  
How pleasant to go to a friend on a visit.  
I go to my friend, we walk on the grass,  
And the hours and moments like minutes pass.*

or Charles Causley's lyrical 'Timothy Winters' depicting childhood neglect and deprivation – both strong themes of the lockdown.

But there we leave it, perhaps provoking as many questions as issues addressed. We trust that the project has offered new poems, opened up new thoughts, feelings or possibilities, and will keep us open to reading more poetry. We ended the series with a note of hope with Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*, but there is never really a last word. So as a final bow, we present a poem from the African-American poet Maya Angelou which we have only just discovered – our thanks to the reader who sent it earlier this week – as sustenance in the no doubt challenging times which still lie ahead.

## **Touched by an Angel**

by Maya Angelou

*We, unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight  
to liberate us into life.*

*Love arrives  
and in its train come ecstasies  
old memories of pleasure  
ancient histories of pain.  
Yet if we are bold,  
love strikes away the chains of fear  
from our souls.*

*We are weaned from our timidity  
In the flush of love's light  
we dare be brave  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.*

## **Fourteen 'Poems for These Times'**

Lyn Ungar: 'Pandemic'

Lao Tsu: Tao Te Ching, Chapter Forty-seven

Czeslaw Milosz: 'Before Majesty'

D.H. Lawrence: 'Trust'

Jane Hirshfield: 'The Weighing'

Amir Khusrau: Ghazal 1836

Rupert Brooke: 'The Dead'

Benjamin Zephaniah: 'The Old Truth'

R.M. Rilke: 'Tenth Duino Elegy' (extract)

Elizabeth Jennings: 'Song of Time'

John Milton: 'Adam's Lament', from *Paradise Lost*

Ted Hughes: 'A Green Mother'

Kathleen Raine: 'The Instrument'

Seamus Heaney: 'Human beings suffer...', from *The Cure at Troy*

## **Sources**

I. STEVIE SMITH: 'The Pleasures of Friendship', in *Mother, What is a Man* (1942) (From *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, Faber & Faber, 2015)

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