

# Ships, Boats and all that Floats

## Poetry Meeting 8th November 2022

The first two poems were chosen by **Gill**

### A man and a boat by Norman MacCaig

It was his honey of environment  
Where acquiescence was easy, the place where he  
Became transparent and was heaven-sent.

He was easy in it as a fox in his coat.  
And it was his own idea, identity,  
Large, better and battered self, and still afloat.

It was haunted by crabs and breathed of Stockholm  
tar.

It looked like melodeon music and took the waves  
In a bucking jig-time, six to the blessed bar.

No meditative or senseless element  
Loitering ashore lumber of planks and staves  
But spoke their lingo and knew what they well  
meant.

And gibberish of horizons to him was clear  
Comments to go by, explaining clause and clause  
Their subtle story to his always listening ear.

His direction was all between the red and green  
Pacing athwart the Pole Star. His anchorage was  
Indifference. He left no mark where he had been.

He used to drink in the waterfront pubs, aloof  
Under the coiled smoke, speaking to nobody.  
When he looked up, stars broke on the dirty roof.

-Not real enough. He'd go into the cold air  
Amid the wider silence and smile in it to see  
The friendly water and himself waiting there.



### A section of Ulysses by Alfred Lord Tennyson



There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;  
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,  
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with  
me,

That ever with a frolic welcome took  
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed  
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;  
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.

Death closes all; but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.  
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;  
The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.

Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
Though much is taken, much abides; and though  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Barbara chose the next three poems



### Big Steamers by Rudyard Kipling

"Oh, where are you going to, all you Big Steamers,  
With England's own coal, up and down the salt seas?"  
"We are going to fetch you your bread and your butter,  
Your beef, pork, and mutton, eggs, apples, and cheese."  
"And where will you fetch it from, all you Big Steamers,  
And where shall I write you when you are away?"  
"We fetch it from Melbourne, Quebec, and Vancouver—  
Address us at Hobart, Hong-Kong, and Bombay."  
"But if anything happened to all you Big Steamers,  
And suppose you were wrecked up and down the salt  
sea?"  
"Then you'd have no coffee or bacon for breakfast,  
And you'd have no muffins or toast for your tea."  
"Then I'll pray for fine weather for all you Big Steamers,  
For little blue billows and breezes so soft."  
"Oh, billows and breezes don't bother Big Steamers,  
For we're iron below and steel-rigging aloft."  
"Then I'll build a new lighthouse for all you Big Steamers,  
With plenty wise pilots to pilot you through."  
"Oh, the Channel's as bright as a ball-room already,  
And pilots are thicker than pilchards at Looe."  
"Then what can I do for you, all you Big Steamers,  
Oh, what can I do for your comfort and good?"  
"Send out your big warships to watch your big waters,  
That no one may stop us from bringing you food."  
"For the bread that you eat and the biscuits you nibble,  
The sweets that you suck and the joints that you carve,  
They are brought to you daily by all us Big Steamers—  
And if one hinders our coming you'll starve!"

### My Bed is a Boat by Robert Louis Stevenson

My bed is like a little boat;  
Nurse helps me in when I embark;  
She girds me in my sailor's coat  
And starts me in the dark.  
At night I go on board and say  
Good-night to all my friends on shore;  
I shut my eyes and sail away  
And see and hear no more.  
And sometimes things to bed I take,  
As prudent sailors have to do;  
Perhaps a slice of wedding-cake,  
Perhaps a toy or two.  
All night across the dark we steer;  
But when the day returns at last,  
Safe in my room beside the pier,  
I find my vessel fast.



### Where go the Boats by Robert Louis Stevenson

Dark brown is the river,  
Golden is the sand.  
It flows along for ever,  
With trees on either hand.  
Green leaves a-floating,  
Castles of the foam,  
Boats of mine a-boating –  
Where will all come home?  
On goes the river  
And out past the mill,  
Away down the valley,  
Away down the hill.  
Away down the river,  
A hundred miles or more,  
Other little children  
Shall bring my boats ashore.

Iona Ferry by Kenneth Steven



It's the smell I remember —  
The dizziness of diesel, tarry rope, wood sheened  
like toffee.  
The sea was waving in the wind, a dancing —  
I wanted it to be rough and yet I didn't.  
My mother and I snuggled under the awning,  
To a dark rocking. We were as low as the waves,  
All of us packed in tight like bales of wool.

The engine roared alive, its tremor  
Juddered through the wood and thrilled me, beat  
my heart.  
The shore began fading behind the white curl of our  
hum.  
Fourteen days lay barefoot on the island —  
Still asleep, their eyes all shut.  
And yet I knew them all already,  
Felt them in my pocket like polished stones —  
Their orchids their hurt-, white sand, their larksong.

A Channel Passage by Rupert Brooke

The damned ship lurched and slithered. Quiet and quick  
My cold gorge rose; the long sea rolled; I knew  
I must think hard of something, or be sick;  
And could think hard of only one thing -- YOU!  
You, you alone could hold my fancy ever!  
And with you memories come, sharp pain, and dole.  
Now there's a choice -- heartache or tortured liver!  
A sea-sick body, or a you-sick soul!

Do I forget you? Retchings twist and tie me,  
Old meat, good meals, brown gobbets, up I throw.  
Do I remember? Acrid return and slimy,  
The sobs and slobber of a last years woe.  
And still the sick ship rolls. 'Tis hard, I tell ye,  
To choose 'twixt love and nausea, heart and belly.

The first of **Valerie's** poems is set in the calm of a  
summer river

A Boat, beneath a Sunny Sky by Lewis Caroll

A boat, beneath a sunny sky  
Lingering onward dreamily  
In an evening of July—  
Children three that nestle near,  
Eager eye and willing ear,  
Pleased a simple tale to hear—  
Long has faded that sunny sky:  
Echoes fade and memories die:  
Autumn frosts have slain July.  
Still she haunts me, phantomwise,  
Alice moving under skies  
Never seen by waking eyes.  
Children yet, the tale to hear,  
Eager eye and willing ear,  
Lovingly shall nestle near.  
In a Wonderland they lie,  
Dreaming as the days go by,  
Dreaming as the summers die:

Ever drifting down the stream—  
Lingering in the golden gleam—  
Life, what is it but a dream?

Linger  
Balloons  
Air  
Hot  
Slowly  
Up



Woman Work by Maya Angelou

I've got the children to tend  
The clothes to mend  
The floor to mop  
The food to shop  
Then the chicken to fry  
The baby to dry  
I got company to feed  
The garden to weed  
I've got shirts to press  
The tots to dress  
The cane to be cut  
I gotta clean up this hut  
Then see about the sick  
And the cotton to pick.

Shine on me, sunshine  
Rain on me, rain  
Fall softly, dewdrops  
And cool my brow again.

Storm, blow me from here  
With your fiercest wind  
Let me float across the sky  
'Til I can rest again.

Fall gently, snowflakes  
Cover me with white  
Cold icy kisses and  
Let me rest tonight.

Sun, rain, curving sky  
Mountain, oceans, leaf and stone  
Star shine, moon glow  
You're all that I can call my own.

a quiet boat by Amy Ludwig VanDerwater

a quiet boat  
on a quiet lake  
under quiet rain  
floats in my mind  
and even if  
today gets loud  
or scary  
i know i can find  
that quiet boat  
in the quiet forest  
the quiet forest  
of my brain  
anytime i wish  
i can sail and dream  
in a quiet boat  
under quiet rain

Linna's first poem

Basking Shark by Norman MacCaig

To stub an oar on a rock where none should be,  
To have it rise with a slounge out of the sea  
Is a thing that happened once (too often) to me.

But not too often – though enough. I count as gain  
That once I met, on a sea tin-tacked with rain,  
That roomsized monster with a matchbox brain.

He displaced more than water. He shoggled me  
Centuries back – this decadent townee  
Shook on a wrong branch of his family tree.

Swish up the dirt and, when it settles, a spring  
Is all the clearer. I saw me, in one fling,  
Emerging from the slime of everything.

So who's the monster? The thought made me grow pale  
For twenty seconds while, sail after sail,  
The tall fin slid away and then the tail.



## Linna's second poem

### Praise of a Boat by Norman MacCaig

The \**Bateau ivre* and the *Marie Celeste*,  
The *Flying Dutchman* hurdling latitudes -  
You could make a list (sad ones like the *Lusitania*  
And brave puffed-up ones like the *Mayflower*).

Mine's called *the boat*. It's a quiet anonymous one  
That needs my two arms to drag it through the water.  
It takes me huge distances of a few miles  
From its lair in Loch Roe to fishy Soya.

It prances on the spot in its watery stable.  
It butts the running tide with a bull's head.  
It skims downwind, planing like a shearwater.  
In crossrips it's awkward as a piano.

And what a coffin it is for haddocks  
And bomb-shaped lythe and tigerish mackerel -  
Though it once met a basking shark with a bump  
And sailed for a while looking over its shoulder.

When salmon are about it goes glib in the dark,  
Whispering a net out over the sternsheets -  
How it crabs the tide-rush, the cunning thing,  
While arms plunge down for the wrestling silver.

Boat of no dreams, you open spaces  
The mind can't think of till it's in them.  
Where the world is easy and dangerous and  
Who can distinguish saints and sinners?

Sometimes that space reaches out  
Till I'm enclosed in it in stony Edinburgh  
And I hear you like a barrel thumping on head waves  
Or in still water gurgling like a baby.

\**Le Bateau ivre* (The Drunken Boat) is a 100-line verse-poem written in 1871 by Arthur Rimbaud. The poem describes the drifting and sinking of a boat lost at sea.

A Lythe is a Pollack

## My first choice

### Crossing the Loch by Kathleen Jamie

Remember how we rowed toward the cottage  
on the sickle-shaped bay,  
that one night after the pub  
loosed us through its swinging doors  
and we pushed across the shingle  
till water lipped the sides  
as though the loch mouthed 'boat'?

I forget who rowed. Our jokes hushed.  
The oars' splash, creak, and the spill  
of the loch reached long into the night.  
Out in the race I was scared:  
the cold shawl of breeze,  
and hunched hills; what the water held  
of deadheads, ticking nuclear hulls.

Who rowed, and who kept their peace?  
Who hauled salt-air and stars  
deep into their lungs, were not reassured;  
and who first noticed the loch's  
phosphorescence, so, like a twittering nest  
washed from the rushes, an astonished  
small boat of saints, we watched water shine  
on our fingers and oars,  
the magic dart of our bow wave?

It was surely foolhardy, such a broad loch, a tide,  
but we live — and even have children  
to women and men we had yet to meet  
that night we set out, calling our own  
the sky and salt-water, wounded hills  
dark-starred by blaeberreries, the glimmering  
anklets  
we wore in the shallows  
as we shipped oars and jumped,  
to draw the boat safe, high at the cottage shore.



Irene chose two old favourites

### Sea Fever by John Masefield

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,  
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by,  
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,  
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking,

I must down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide  
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;  
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,  
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.

I must down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,  
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;  
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,  
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.



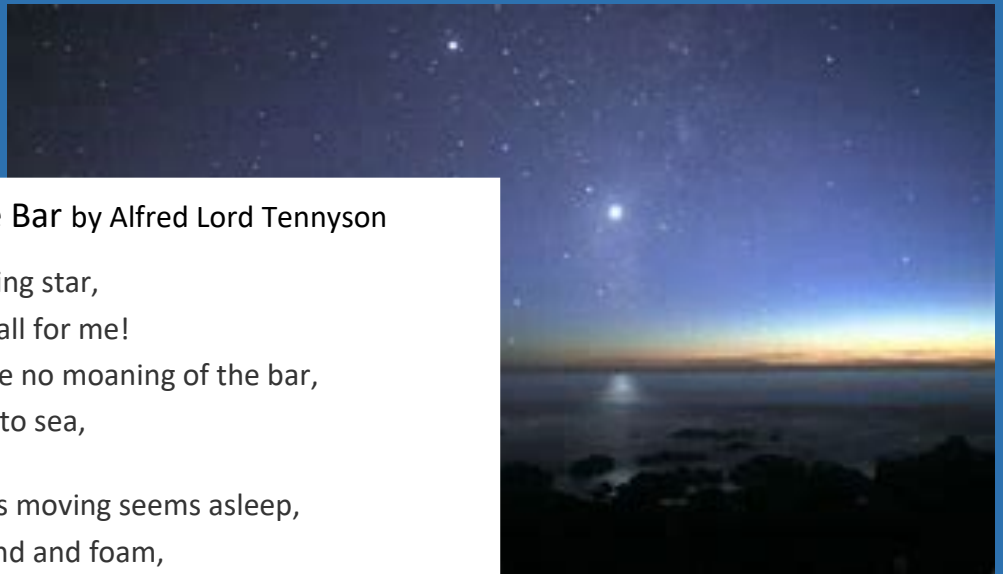
### Crossing the Bar by Alfred Lord Tennyson

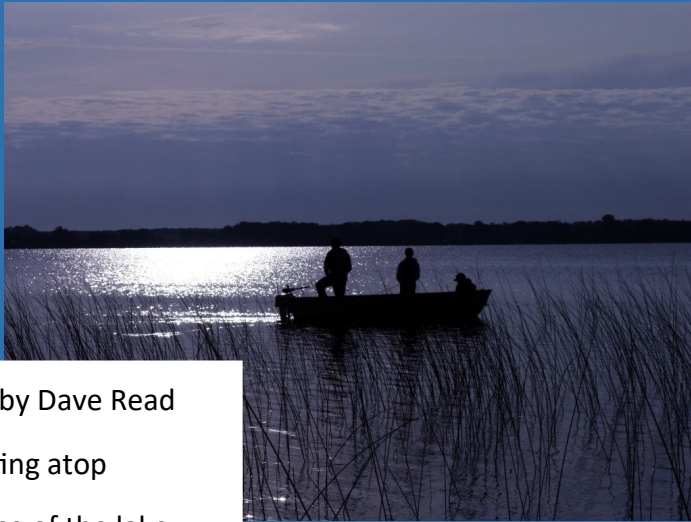
Sunset and evening star,  
And one clear call for me!  
And may there be no moaning of the bar,  
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,  
Too full for sound and foam,  
When that which drew from out the boundless deep  
Turns again home.

Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have cross'd the bar.





Untitled by Dave Read

Floating atop

The surface of the lake

The moon's

Silver coins slip

Through his fishing net

A Gray Day by Lucy Archer



A gray day, and the gulls are gone,  
Visor of mist o'er the sun is drawn,  
The cordage creaks and the sails all strain,  
The deck is drenched with the rushing rain,  
The waves leap strong at the struggling keel,  
And the ship rides madly with a plunge and reel,  
But the sailors shout as they haul away,  
And merrily sing, for it's not care they  
For the wind that screams on the lee,  
Or a gray day out at sea.

Three poems read by Lin

Fishing by Jack Stewart

Beyond the leaning shocks  
of dune grass  
Lake Michigan broke  
into blossom.

The coho boats,  
out early,  
tested lines  
against the current,

set their run  
by the tide.  
Their rhythm chugging  
faintly all day,

they burrowed  
into the horizon  
setting line after line  
to change the water's pull

the gathering drag  
of their load.  
Just so, I wait  
for the water to go white

from each syllable's  
dropped stroke,  
count ripples  
until they clear;

listen for  
a current  
thick enough  
to shape its own tide.



## Paper Boats

Rabindranath Tagore 1861-1941

Day by day I float my paper boats one by one down the running stream.

In big black letters I write my name on them and the name of the village where I live.

I hope that someone in some strange land will find them and know who I am.

I load my little boats with *shiuli* flowers from our garden, and hope that these blooms of the dawn will be carried safely to land in the night.

I launch my paper boats and look up into the sky and see the little clouds setting their white bulging sails.

I know not what playmate of mine in the sky sends them down the air to race with my boats!

When night comes I bury my face in my arms and dream that my paper boats float on and on under the midnight stars.

The fairies of sleep are sailing in them, and the lading is their baskets full of dreams.



George Wyllie's paper boat QM—the Pride of the Origami Line, launched 6 May 1989 at Finnieston

There was even a blessing by industrial chaplain Revd Norman Orr and a naming ceremony by the writer Naomi Mitchison. Accompanied by the Da Capo Choir from Greenock, George, in his pristine white boiler suit and captain's hat, performed "a corny wee tune, a paddle-steamer song" which he'd composed for the occasion. The Paper Boat Song.

The boat travelled from Glasgow to Liverpool and on to London, New York, Antwerp, Dumfries and the east coast of Scotland.

The boat was taken on many journeys, but eventually George sent it to a shipyard at Inverkeithing and had it broken up like a real liner. He recycled the material and made a giant goose, which he called "Truce Goose", for a project in 1993 about a compromise between farmers and conservationists over the thousands of geese which consumed huge amounts of grass on the Hebridean island of Islay every year.

He was heavily influenced by French poet Arthur Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat" poem, the first line of which describes a something or someone in a boat "floating down unconcerned rivers" being "steered by the Haulers".

<https://georgewyllie.com/project/the-paper-boat-2>