

WORKING FOLK

Meeting held on 12 September 2023

We begin with two poems chosen by **Elinor**

The Scullery Maid by Jean-Baptiste- Siméon Chardin Poem by Liz Lochhead

The scullery maid speaks
He liked me fine, the Master,
called-me 'pretty as a picture'
the day he stopped me at my scouring.
I was more than a mere scullery maid to him he said —
or rather as something to pay attention to today
than a bonny scullery maid like me
he could think of nothing better.
He never called me by my name — I think he never knew it,
or needed to - nor so much as touched my rough-work apron
that he said had a coarseness he liked the look of
as so he did my good clean house-frock's unbleached
nothing-sort-of-colour that set off nicely
the peach-ness of my skin.
That got me blushing, but I needn't have bothered.
Looking back, I can see his glad eye
was as greedy for copper, earthenware, old cooperage,
the glimmer in the long-handled pan I worked at.
He made every bit as much of that daft cellar boy
who is the bane of my life always with his crude remarks
and grabbing hands given the half-a-chance I aye
have to make sure he never gets. The Master
made him look human, almost handsome, yes,
he certainly stands out there in his kitchen-whites
against the cellar's dimness beside the old tub
among his jugs and flask and funnel.
To him we were a pair.
'Hold still!' he said and that was the only time
he ever spoke to me with any hint of sharpness
And I might have said 'Never mind M'sieur Chardin,
That I've work to be done the mistress won't be letting me
off with
And these pots won't wash themselves!'-except it wasn't
my place to, was it?
Besides, squinting at me through those spectacles,
dabbing at his canvas, tutting,
I could see that he was hard at work
and I liked that.
It gave me pause.

The Potato Pickers by Kenneth Steven

Hollows of mist; September smells so thick
Of chestnuts scudded down and leaves in wet
And water drumming choked towards the town.

Farms lie here, dark as blackened books
And dykes rib over chests of curving land
Into the rain.

Like fish creels crates are steepled
There by the field's edge. Slumped with mud
The tractor's rumbled track reflects the sky.

Now the pickers splay down in the ruts
Thudding their baskets with pale lumps
All out of shape and smooth as fossil shells.

They move like ragged crows across the day
Legs planted wide, heads slanted over rain
Until in bleary stars lights home the dusk.

Read by **Irene**

The Pedlar's Caravan by W B Rands

I wish I lived in a caravan,
With a horse to drive, like the pedlar man!
Where he comes from nobody knows,
Or where he goes to, but on he goes!
His caravan has windows, two,
And a chimney of tin, that the smoke comes
through;
He has a wife, with a baby brown,
And they go riding from town to town!
"Chairs to mend and delf to sell!"
He clashes the basins like a bell;
Tea-trays, baskets, ranged in order,
Plates with the alphabet round the border!
The roads are brown and the sea is green,
But his house is just like a bathing machine;
The world is round and he can ride,
Rumble and splash to the other side!
With the pedlar-man I should like to roam,
And write a book when I came home;
All the people would read my book,
Just like the Travels of Captain Cook!

Irene's second poem was one I couldn't find

Consumer Complaint by C Marjorie Smith

Flood Tide by Edwin Morgan

Lonely people are drawn to the sea.
Not for this artist the surge and glitter of salons,
Clutch of a sherry or making polite conversation.
See here when she is free: –
Striding into the salty bluster of a cliff-top
In her paint-splashed corduroys,
Humming as she recalls the wild shy boys
She sketched in the city, allowing nature's nations
Of grasses and wild shy flowers to stick
To the canvas they were blown against
By the mighty Catterline wind –
All becomes art, and as if it was incensed
By the painter's brush the sea growls up
In a white flood.
The artist's cup
Is overflowing with what she dares
To think is joy, caught unawares
As if on the wing. A solitary clover,
Unable to read WET PAINT, rolls over
Once, twice, and then it's fixed,
Part of a field more human than the one
That took the gale and is now
As she is beyond the sun.

Remembering the artist Joan Eardley

The Day the Earth was Flat by Kenneth Steven

I go there still, in my mind
Down half a dozen autumns to the place
We picked potatoes. Through a lens of rain
The fields slide flat, boots suck
Up to the shins in mud. The travellers watch,
Skinned the colour of ripe horse chestnuts,
Eyes like unbroken horses, their language
Hot as whisky. They'd rather spit at us than talk.
The tractor rambles on across the field
Its bad lungs smoking, then suddenly,
Around our feet are shells, soft lumps that drum
Into the buckets. All our backs are hunched
Along the line of hours that drizzle on
Till farm lights start to home the dusk
Across the valley. We walk back crippled,
Slumped sacks too tired for talk. Only Jo
Sparks up the firefly of a cigarette
And lets us suck its dizzy sweetness;
Dave brings a golden bottle from his bag –
We drink pure pain and nodding, call it bliss.
I see us still back there, all walking onwards into men
Our world no wider than that one potato field
Our world as flat, our fears no bigger.



Catterline Bay

Joan Eardley

Jane's first poem

The Artist at the Start of the Day by John O'Donohue

May morning be astir with the harvest of night;
Your mind quickening to the eros of a new
question,
Your eyes seduced by some unintended glimpse
That cut right through the surface to a source.

May this be a morning of innocent beginning,
When the gift within you slips clear
Of the sticky web of the personal
With its hurt and its hauntings,
And fixed fortress corners,

A Morning when you become a pure vessel
For what wants to ascend from silence,

May your imagination know
The grace of perfect danger,

To reach beyond imitation,
And the wheel of repetition,

Deep into the call of all
The unfinished and unsolved

Until the veil of the unknown yields
And something original begins
To stir toward your senses
And grow stronger in your heart

In order to come to birth
In a clean line of form,
That claims from time
A rhythm not yet heard,
That calls space to
A different shape.

May it be its own force field
And dwell uniquely
Between the heart and the light

To surprise the hungry eye
By how deftly it fits
About its secret loss.

Jane's second choice was 'For the Farmer'
another poem by John Donohue, but I'm sorry I
couldn't find it

Valerie's first poem

Digging by Seamus Heaney

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

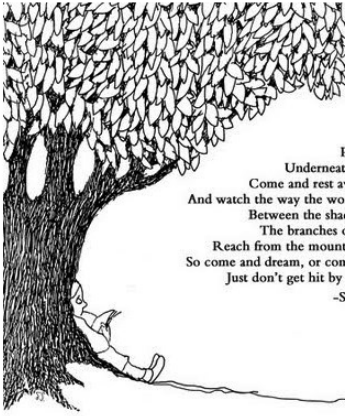
By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.





POET'S TREE
Underneath the poet tree
Come and rest awhile with me,
And watch the way the word-web weaves
Between the shady story leaves.
The branches of the poet tree
Reach from the mountains to the sea.
So come and dream, or come and climb—
Just don't get hit by falling rhymes.
—Shel Silverstein

Barbara's first poem

Engineer's Corner by Wendy Cope

We make more fuss of ballads than of blueprints --
That's why so many poets end up rich,
While engineers scrape by in cheerless garrets.
Who needs a bridge or dam? Who needs a ditch?

Whereas the person who can write a sonnet
Has got it made. It's always been the way,
For everybody knows that we need poems
And everybody reads them every day.

Yes, life is hard if you choose engineering --
You're sure to need another job as well;
You'll have to plan your projects in the evenings
Instead of going out. It must be hell.

While well-heeled poets ride around in Daimlers,
You'll burn the midnight oil to earn a crust,
With no hope of a statue in the Abbey,
With no hope, even, of a modest bust.

No wonder small boys dream of writing couplets
And spurn the bike, the lorry and the train.
There's far too much encouragement of poets --
That's why this country's going down the drain.

Valerie's second poem

Warming her Pearls by Carol Ann Duffy

Next to my own skin, her pearls. My mistress
bids me wear them, warm them, until evening
when I'll brush her hair. At six, I place them
round her cool, white throat. All day I think of her,

resting in the Yellow Room, contemplating silk
or taffeta, which gown tonight? She fans herself
whilst I work willingly, my slow heat entering
each pearl. Slack on my neck, her rope.

She's beautiful. I dream about her
in my attic bed; picture her dancing
with tall men, puzzled by my faint, persistent scent
beneath her French perfume, her milky stones.

I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
watch the soft blush seep through her skin
like an indolent sigh. In her looking-glass
my red lips part as though I want to speak.

Full moon. Her carriage brings her home. I see
her every movement in my head.... Undressing,
taking off her jewels, her slim hand reaching
for the case, slipping naked into bed, the way

she always does.... And I lie here awake,
knowing the pearls are cooling even now
in the room where my mistress sleeps. All night
I feel their absence and I burn.



Mary chose two by Norman MacCaig

Explorer

Trampling new seas with filthy timbers, he
Jotted down headlands, speculated on
Vestigial civilisations, ate strange fruits
And called his officers Mister. When sails were gone

Bundling and tumbling down the shrieking dark,
He trailed the Bible as sea-ancho; when
Reefs shaved the barnacles from the keel, he took
His gentlemanly snuff. Each night at ten,

Under the lamp from which his cabin swung,
He logged the latest, drank his grog and spread,
With only one uncomprehending sigh,
His wild uncharted world upon his bed.

Two Shepherds

Donald roared and ran and brandished
his stick and swore
in all the languages
he knew, which were
some.

Pollóchan sauntered, stood
six feet three silent: with a small
turn of the hand
he'd send the collie flowing
round the half-mile-long arc
of a towsy circle.

Two poets -
Dionysian,
Apollonian
and the sheep in the pen.

Fiona's first poem

In the Spring by Helen B Cruikshank

I've made the taps and the handles gleam
Brighter than ever before,
I've scoured the paint and the bath with Vim
And scrubbed the linoleum floor.
I've polished the set of mahogany chairs
Till my arms are tired and aching.
With laying the carpet on the stairs
My back is nearly breaking.

I've dug the whole of the kitchen rows
And planted the lettuce and beans;
Excepting myself there's no one knows
What this frenzy of energy means.
I'm trying to work you out of my blood
And out of my heart and head,
But you're blazing there in the brass and wood,
And alive in the lettuce bed.

This was **Anne's** first poem

Those Winter Sundays by Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.
I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,
Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

This is **Anne's** second choice

Address to Medical Students on Graduation

by Professor Lord Kenneth Calman, oncologist, poet

There will come a time when it will be up to you.
In front of you sits a person
Who seeks your help, your care, your compassion.
You will draw on all your experiences
Of teachers, books, resources, past patients
To answer, assist, help this individual
All the anatomy, physiology, pathology, therapeutics
you know is focussed on the problem; but
remember
This is a person, with feelings, emotions, anxieties
Waiting to be listened to and be understood.
More than a collection of bones, muscles, cells
An individual, a whole person, a human being with a
soul
With a family, friends, a home, a job, or not.
The social context of the illness needs similar
concern
That's where you matter.
Making all this come together
The synthesis, the diagnosis, not in any limited
biomedical sense
But as a process of integrating all those factors
which matter to them
With one purpose in mind, and with your
professionalism,
To care for the person in front of you
To help them on their journey to restoration of
health
Or to be with them on a different road to comfort
and care
And share the pain
That's what all this learning is for,
And that time is now.

This is my first choice

These are the hands

by Michael Rosen on the 60th anniversary
of the NHS, published Dec. 2008

These are the hands
That touch us first
Feel your head
Find the pulse
And make your bed.

These are the hands
That tap your back
Test the skin
Hold your arm
Wheel the bin
Change the bulb
Fix the drip
Pour the jug
Replace your hip.

These are the hands
That fill the bath
Mop the floor
Flick the switch
Soothe the sore
Burn the swabs
Give us a jab
Throw out sharps
Design the lab.

And these are the hands
That stop the leaks
Empty the pan
Wipe the pipes
Carry the can
Clamp the veins
Make the cast
Log the dose
And touch us last.

Thelma read an excerpt from

The Village Blacksmith by Longfellow

Under a spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

His hair is crisp, and black, and long,
His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat,
He earns whate'er he can,
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man.

Week in, week out, from morn till night,
You can hear the bellows blow;
You can hear him swing his might sledge,
With measure beat and slow,
Like a sexton ringing the village bell,
When the evening sun is low.

And children coming home from school
Look in the open door;
They love to see the flaming forge,
And hear the bellows roar.
And catch the flaming sparks that fly
Like chaff from a threshing floor.

He goes on Sunday to the church,
And sits among his boys;
He hears the parson pray and preach,
He hears his daughter's voice,
Singing in the choir,
And it makes his heart rejoice.

It sounds to him like his mother's voice,
Singing in Paradise!
He needs must think of her once more,
How in the grave she lies;
And with his hard, rough hands he wipes
A tear out of his eyes.

Toiling, -- rejoicing, -- sorrowing,
Onward in life he goes;
Each morning sees some task begin,
Each evening sees it close;
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned his night's repose.

Thanks, thanks to thee, my worthy friend,
For the lesson thou has taught!
Thus at the flaming forge of life
Our fortunes must be wrought;
Thus on its sounding anvil shaped
Each burning deed and thought.

Fiona's second poem

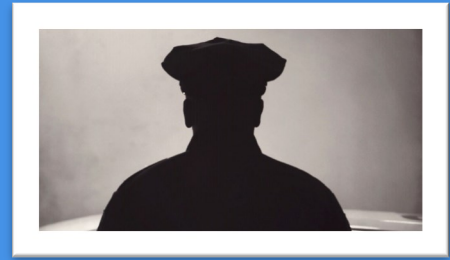
Harvest Hymn by John Betjeman.

We spray the fields and scatter
The poison on the ground
So that no wicked wild flowers
Upon our farm be found.
We like whatever helps us
To line our purse with pence;
The twenty-four-hour broiler-house
And neat electric fence.
All concrete sheds around us
And Jaguars in the yard,
The telly lounge and deep-freeze
Are ours from working hard.
We fire the fields for harvest,
The hedges swell the flame,
The oak trees and the cottages
From which our fathers came.
We give no compensation,
The earth is ours today,
And if we lose on arable,
The bungalows will pay.
All concrete sheds around us
And Jaguars in the yard
The telly lounge and deep freeze
Are ours from working hard.

Barbara's second poem

Cathedral Builders by John Ormond

They climbed on sketchy ladders towards God,
with winch and pulley hoisted hewn rock into heaven,
inhabited the sky with hammers,
defied gravity,
deified stone,
took up God's house to meet him,
and came down to their suppers
and small beer,
every night slept, lay with their smelly wives,
quarrelled and cuffed the children,
lied, spat, sang, were happy, or unhappy,
and every day took to the ladders again,
impeded the rights of way of another summer's swallows,
grew greyer, shakier,
became less inclined to fix a neighbour's roof of a fine
evening,
saw naves sprout arches, clerestories soar,
cursed the loud fancy glaziers for their luck,
somehow escaped the plague,
got rheumatism,
decided it was time to give it up,
to leave the spire to others,
stood in the crowd, well back from the vestments at the
consecration,
envied the fat bishop his warm boots,
cocked a squint eye aloft,
and said, 'I bloody did that.'



My own choice of second poem

Brooklyn Cop by Norman MacCaig

Built like a gorilla but less timid,
thick-fleshed, steak-coloured, with two
hieroglyphs in his face that mean
trouble, he walks the sidewalk and the
thin tissue over violence. This morning,
when he said, 'See you, babe' to his wife,
he hoped it, he truly hoped it.

He is a gorilla
to whom 'Hiya, honey' is no cliché.

Should the tissue tear, should he plunge
through
into violence, what clubbings, what
gunshots between Phoebe's Whamburger
and Louie's Place.

Who would be him, gorilla with a nightstick,
whose home is a place
he might, this time, never get back to?

And who would be who have to be
his victims?



The meeting closed with

a rousing rendition

of the song

'Sixteen Tons'