

Five poems selected for reading and discussion at the StAnza 2021 Masterclass with Colette Byre
Sunday 7 March at 12 noon (Part I discussion streamed onto the StAnza website, Part II a Live Zoom
Q&A <https://stanzapoetry.org/festival/events/stanza-masterclass-5>)

Couchsurfing with Nikolay

He met us at Kiev station,
its crematorium-like archways
filigreed with gold,
its Soviet escalators
lapping like tongues of steel.

We had walked past him, twice:
his cries drowned
under the brakes of arriving trains
that screamed and bayed
like the cast of a Hammer Horror.

He led us through a park,
its Chernobyl swings laden with snow,
and through a brutalist underpass
grey and dead as graphite.
Here I uzed to play viz mother,

he says, brow rucked to tram lines.
At his flat, he makes us tea
turning on all three bars
of an electric heater
that glow orange with the dust-

singed scent of irregular use.
Clutching vodka, he points out landmarks
from his tenth-floor window,
eyes limpid as marbles
in the watery light.

All evening long
his war stories looped and fell
like Panzer-struck birds.
The next morning, we slunk out early
saying we had a flight to catch. Untrue.

At the underpass, I gazed back at his block:
a sheaf of starlings
twisted like biblical locusts
against its sun-surprised brick.
The only life I can remember.

Alex Howard

Miss means both *Mother* and *No-one*

The trainee teacher is crying in the loo. This time, in both intensity and duration, she has achieved Outstanding. And it's not Jed Simmonds or bottom-set Year Nine on Fridays, period five. It's not the safeguarding training or differentiation six ways for every class. She doesn't cry for the Year Ten girls whose names she struggles to remember, so well have they hidden themselves behind long hair, immaculate behaviour, and exactly average grades. The trainee teacher is crying in the loo, her heart a strip-lit cubicle whose bulb is on the blink. And it's not her failure to meet sub-point 4d of the Teachers' Standards that's set her off on this occasion, nor is it the uniform policy or the two-hundred-and-twenty-three books she has to mark each fortnight with rainbow highlighters, colour-coded for feedback, action, and response. The trainee teacher is crying in the loo, her heart a plug of chewing gum sticking to her ribs. She does not cry for the spreadsheets in which she must evidence two sub-levels of expected progress for each pupil, regardless of the child. She does not cry for the boy who mimicked fingering her when her back was to the class, nor for the Head who doesn't know her name. The trainee teacher is crying in the loo, her heart wrung and stinking as the mouldy mophead there's no budget to replace. She cries for let's-call-him Jaydon, Ahmed, Tom, held in isolation for a week because he threw a chair when his dad's parole date was postponed, for let's-call-her Aisha, Kayla, Kim who cuts and cuts and shows her all the wounds, for the shrug of the Designated Safeguarding Lead (who's heard far worse than this today), for the twelve-year-old who can't yet read, for the school-to-prison pipeline, for let's-call-him Connor, Jason, Chris slumped forever on the tutting chair outside the Head of Year.

Kathryn Bevis

The Landing Site of Beagle Two

calls to mind night time on the children's ward, /
East Grinstead, when I was almost nine.
Sometimes items sent across a space like that
were changed, became the weight of object,
a personal effect, (that upturned book
my mother half-read and left — *the Famous Five*,
a card game we'd played when there was nothing much
to say, toothpaste) reminded me of faces
of those who'd handled them or the softness
of their hands.
Woken often in the dark, observed,
monitored by those who could not give love
who'd keep instead the sterile distance of worlds.
So it was, or must have been,
when that eccentric high-tech dish,
a strange machine cast from earth
fell far too fast through thin air,
miles from home and out of place
to land in dust and rock, and there on Mars
signal blocked, it's thought it still passed on
some trace of us, its nine note sign to silence.

Michael Brown

The gardener

Once I found his glove, and bent to pick it up -
nothing but leaves. It was October, the first time
I saw him, a quiet day. Any wind
might have taken him before he was ready.

His back, three quarters turned to me. The dull shine
on a khaki waistcoat. Rubbing his jaw -
I believed I could hear the little rasp. Dry grass?
He had a texture much like a walnut tree.

A thinking man, taking his time, pondering
the small green rows, his hands patient as plough horses
in the furrow. Did he know I was there?
My presence accidental, a cloud passing.

How long the trace of him lingered, I can't tell.
After a while, he faded, his spade too.
The robin perched for a while on mine, and vanished,
needing his original patch, his habits,

the ancient patterns. I was not real enough.
Back came the dandelions, hard green of mare's tail,
bindweed loitering through. Ground elder edged
across the paths. A forest of infant birch

reached upward. Could there ever have been a door
in these tumbled walls that a ghost of me
had wandered through? My time falls leaf by leaf, season
by season, garden and gardener unmade.

Meg Peacocke

Two Kingdoms

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick.

*Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor**

Sometimes it's the flickering buzz of the fluorescent lightbulb
as fugged laze, the haze of a thought just tipped out of its sling.
It's too early to tell. The border station at the river bulge
between Narva and Ivangorod, the Russian side with fouling

toilets and the queue where we wait beside ourselves, together
and time-limited. Did I pack my own bags? They're in the belly
of the overnight bus as an act of hope. Who knows what small treasures
life has placed in my body's dark pockets. I doubt the messy

bowel and guts. The spleen. Elemental pancreas. The testicle's implosion.
The breast's full presence then full absence. I compose myself carefully.
Where will I stay? A small отель in St Petersburg. In my body. Each intrusion
pretends the form of the question, why are you here? Satisfied, he carelessly

stamps both my passports. The two kingdoms draw fuzzy edges
of forest, marsh, wetlands full of bulrush and sludge. This river,
like a pulsing artery, blocked by industry's productive leverage,
a guessed border, an invention. I don't know what I carry over.

Samuel Tongue