The Reader

Life Lines

A Shared Reading activity pack
to read wherever you are

Issue 42

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'So birds of peace and hope and love / Come fluttering ...'

The Sparrow, *Paul Laurence Dunbar*

The Reader is a charity which usually brings people together to listen to stories, extracts and poems in free, weekly Shared Reading groups. In these Life Lines activity packs we hope to offer everyone the same comfort, meaning and connection through great literature that our reading groups provide – wherever it finds you.

During this time when many of the ordinary activities that fill our days have changed somewhat, we have been challenged to find new things to explore. Each Life Lines pack will bring you some of a story and a poem, which you can read in your own time. Along with the reading, you'll find a selection of thoughts and feelings shared by other fellow readers about the chosen pieces. We suggest that reading the poem or the story out loud is a great way to get below the surface and make your own connection with them. It may feel strange but it does make a difference, so do please give it a try!

As always, do feel free to make notes on your own thoughts and feelings as you go, perhaps marking words or sentences that particularly stand out to you…

This week we're bringing you an extract from Virginia Woolf's* Mrs Dalloway. *In these pages we begin to enter the minds of different people passing through a London street. Peter has just paid a visit to Clarissa, an old flame, admitting to her as they talk that he has now fallen in love again, this time with Daisy, a married woman with children. He has made this trip to London to see if he can help her get a divorce. But though at the time he had sounded sure of what he was saying, one begins to wonder, listening to Peter turn the situation over again in his mind, what is love really, and does it ever really exist purely as itself?

Extract from Mrs Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

Could it be that he was in love with her then, remembering the misery, the torture, the extraordinary passion of those days? It was a different thing altogether--a much pleasanter thing--the truth being, of course, that now *she* was in love with *him.* And that perhaps was the reason why, when the ship actually sailed, he felt an extraordinary relief, wanted nothing so much as to be alone; was annoyed to find all her little attentions--cigars, notes, a rug for the voyage--in his cabin. Every one if they were honest would say the same; one doesn't want people after fifty; one doesn't want to go on telling women they are pretty; that's what most men of fifty would say, Peter Walsh thought, if they were honest.

But then these astonishing accesses of emotion--bursting into tears this morning, what was all that about? What could Clarissa have thought of him? thought him a fool presumably, not for the first time. It was jealousy that was at the bottom of it--jealousy which survives every other passion of mankind, Peter Walsh thought, holding his pocket-knife at arm's length. She had been meeting Major Orde, Daisy said in her last letter; said it on purpose he knew; said it to make him jealous; he could see her wrinkling her forehead as she wrote, wondering what she could say to hurt him; and yet it made no difference; he was furious! All this pother of coming to England and seeing lawyers wasn't to marry her, but to prevent her from marrying anybody else. That was what tortured him, that was what came over him when he saw Clarissa so calm, so cold, so intent on her dress or whatever it was; realising what she might have spared him, what she had reduced him to--a whimpering, snivelling old ass. But women, he thought, shutting his pocket-knife, don't know what passion is. They don't know the meaning of it to men. Clarissa was as cold as an icicle. There she would sit on the sofa by his side, let him take her hand, give him one kiss--Here he was at the crossing.

A sound interrupted him; a frail quivering sound, a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning into

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo--

the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth; which issued, just opposite Regent's Park Tube station from a tall quivering shape, like a funnel, like

a rusty pump, like a wind-beaten tree for ever barren of leaves which lets the wind run up and down its branches singing

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo

and rocks and creaks and moans in the eternal breeze.

Through all ages--when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise, the battered woman--for she wore a skirt--with her right hand exposed, her left clutching at her side, stood singing of love--love which has lasted a million years, she sang, love which prevails, and millions of years ago, her lover, who had been dead these centuries, had walked, she crooned, with her in May; but in the course of ages, long as summer days, and flaming, she remembered, with nothing but red asters, he had gone; death's enormous sickle had swept those tremendous hills, and when at last she laid her hoary and immensely aged head on the earth, now become a mere cinder of ice, she implored the Gods to lay by her side a bunch of purple-heather, there on her high burial place which the last rays of the last sun caressed; for then the pageant of the universe would be over.

As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent's Park Tube station still the earth seemed green and flowery; still, though it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song, soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilising, leaving a damp stain.

Still remembering how once in some primeval May she had walked with her lover, this rusty pump, this battered old woman with one hand exposed for coppers the other clutching her side, would still be there in ten million years, remembering how once she had walked in May, where the sea flows now, with whom it did not matter--he was a man, oh yes, a man who had loved her. But the passage of ages had blurred the clarity of that ancient May day; the bright petalled flowers were hoar and silver frosted; and she no longer saw, when she implored him (as she did now quite clearly) "look in my eyes with thy sweet eyes intently," she no longer saw brown eyes, black whiskers or sunburnt face but only a looming shape, a shadow shape, to which, with the bird-like freshness of the very aged she still twittered "give me your hand and let me press it gently" (Peter

Walsh couldn't help giving the poor creature a coin as he stepped into his taxi), "and if some one should see, what matter they?" she demanded; and her fist clutched at her side, and she smiled, pocketing her shilling, and all peering inquisitive eyes seemed blotted out, and the passing generations--the pavement was crowded with bustling middle-class people--vanished, like leaves, to be trodden under, to be soaked and steeped and made mould of by that eternal spring--

ee um fah um so
foo swee too eem oo

A Pause for Thought…

Dear Reader, Perhaps this is a good place for us to pause briefly and take stock of what we can see in this scene that is being described to us. It creates such a contrast as we move from the discomfort and dissatisfaction of Peter's thoughts to the sound of the beggar-woman's song. The circumstances of the two are so different but it sounds as though the woman is able to offer Peter something here which is perhaps worth a lot more than the coin which he passes to her. I also wonder whether anyone else hears in the woman's song what Peter seems to be able to hear, and why there is a sense of it being strangely uplifting even though it seems to tell the story of a love that is long dead and gone? But even while we ask ourselves such questions, the passage of people through the street continues…

"Poor old woman," said Rezia Warren Smith, waiting to cross.

Oh poor old wretch!

Suppose it was a wet night? Suppose one's father, or somebody who had known one in better days had happened to pass, and saw one standing there in the gutter? And where did she sleep at night?

Cheerfully, almost gaily, the invincible thread of sound wound up into the air like the smoke from a cottage chimney, winding up clean beech trees and issuing in a tuft of blue smoke among the topmost leaves. "And if some one should see, what matter they?"

Since she was so unhappy, for weeks and weeks now, Rezia

had given meanings to things that happened, almost felt sometimes that she must stop people in the street, if they looked good, kind people, just to say to them "I am unhappy"; and this old woman singing in the street "if some one should see, what matter they?" made her suddenly quite sure that everything was going to be right. They were going to Sir William Bradshaw; she thought his name sounded nice; he would cure Septimus at once. And then there was a brewer's cart, and the grey horses had upright bristles of straw in their tails; there were newspaper placards. It was a silly, silly dream, being unhappy.

So they crossed, Mr. and Mrs. Septimus Warren Smith, and was there, after all, anything to draw attention to them, anything to make a passer-by suspect here is a young man who carries in him the greatest message in the world, and is, moreover, the happiest man in the world, and the most miserable? Perhaps they walked more slowly than other people, and there was something hesitating, trailing, in the man's walk, but what more natural for a clerk, who has not been in the West End on a weekday at this hour for years, than to keep looking at the sky, looking at this, that and the other, as if Portland Place were a room he had come into when the family are away, the chandeliers being hung in holland bags, and the caretaker, as she lets in long shafts of dusty light upon deserted, queer-looking armchairs, lifting one corner of the long blinds, explains to the visitors what a wonderful place it is; how wonderful, but at the same time, he thinks, as he looks at chairs and tables, how strange.

To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile--his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large; so that he was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other, might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in back streets all his life; one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in the evening after the day's work, on the advice of well-known authors consulted by letter.

As for the other experiences, the solitary ones, which people go through alone, in their bedrooms, in their offices, walking the fields and the streets of London, he had them; had left home, a mere boy, because of his mother; she lied; because he came

down to tea for the fiftieth time with his hands unwashed; because he could see no future for a poet in Stroud; and so, making a confidant of his little sister, had gone to London leaving an absurd note behind him, such as great men have written, and the world has read later when the story of their struggles has become famous.

London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith; thought nothing of fantastic Christian names like Septimus with which their parents have thought to distinguish them. Lodging off the Euston Road, there were experiences, again experiences, such as change a face in two years from a pink innocent oval to a face lean, contracted, hostile. But of all this what could the most observant of friends have said except what a gardener says when he opens the conservatory door in the morning and finds a new blossom on his plant:--It has flowered; flowered from vanity, ambition, idealism, passion, loneliness, courage, laziness, the usual seeds, which all muddled up (in a room off the Euston Road), made him shy, and stammering, made him anxious to improve himself, made him fall in love with Miss Isabel Pole, lecturing in the Waterloo Road upon Shakespeare.

Was he not like Keats? she asked; and reflected how she might give him a taste of *Antony and Cleopatra* and the rest; lent him books; wrote him scraps of letters; and lit in him such a fire as burns only once in a lifetime, without heat, flickering a red gold flame infinitely ethereal and insubstantial over Miss Pole; *Antony and Cleopatra;* and the Waterloo Road. He thought her beautiful, believed her impeccably wise; dreamed of her, wrote poems to her, which, ignoring the subject, she corrected in red ink; he saw her, one summer evening, walking in a green dress in a square. "It has flowered," the gardener might have said, had he opened the door; had he come in, that is to say, any night about this time, and found him writing; found him tearing up his writing; found him finishing a masterpiece at three o'clock in the morning and running out to pace the streets, and visiting churches, and fasting one day, drinking another, devouring Shakespeare, Darwin, *The History of Civilisation,* and Bernard Shaw.

Something was up, Mr. Brewer knew; Mr. Brewer, managing clerk at Sibleys and Arrowsmiths, auctioneers, valuers, land and estate agents; something was up, he thought, and, being paternal with his young men, and thinking very highly of Smith's abilities, and prophesying that he would, in ten or fifteen years, succeed to the leather arm-chair in the inner room under the

skylight with the deed-boxes round him, "if he keeps his health," said Mr. Brewer, and that was the danger--he looked weakly; advised football, invited him to supper and was seeing his way to consider recommending a rise of salary, when something happened which threw out many of Mr. Brewer's calculations, took away his ablest young fellows, and eventually, so prying and insidious were the fingers of the European War, smashed a plaster cast of Ceres, ploughed a hole in the geranium beds, and utterly ruined the cook's nerves at Mr. Brewer's establishment at Muswell Hill.

Septimus was one of the first to volunteer. He went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square. There in the trenches the change which Mr. Brewer desired when he advised football was produced instantly; he developed manliness; he was promoted; he drew the attention, indeed the affection of his officer, Evans by name. It was a case of two dogs playing on a hearth-rug; one worrying a paper screw, snarling, snapping, giving a pinch, now and then, at the old dog's ear; the other lying somnolent, blinking at the fire, raising a paw, turning and growling good-temperedly. They had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other. But when Evans (Rezia who had only seen him once called him "a quiet man," a sturdy red-haired man, undemonstrative in the company of women), when Evans was killed, just before the Armistice, in Italy, Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him. It was sublime.

Septimus' story captures for us the size and depth of what other people – strangers – might be carrying with them as they pass by on a walk. We get an interesting mix here of insights into his private life and passions, into things that have happened to him over time, as well as how he has been perceived at different times by his wife, his employer, and by those who do not know him so well. What do we ourselves make of him, I wonder, and can we recognize any elements of his story in our own? What is it that he has been seeking for in his life, and has he now found it, or finally lost it?

Time for a poem ….

We'll pick up with another story again in our next issue, but now a pause for some poetry. Poetry isn't always easy for everyone to get going with. In our Shared Reading groups we read a poem out loud a few times, to give ourselves a bit of time to hear it aloud. Give this a go yourself and see if it helps you to feel comfortable with the words, even if you're still not sure what it's all about!

We aren't looking to find an answer here, or what the person writing it might have meant when they wrote it. We're just looking to see if any feelings or ideas come up when we read it – and often we find that the more time you allow yourself to simply be with the poem, the more thoughts and feelings will come through.

One of the keys is to enjoy yourself: take your time, read it out loud, have a think about any bits you like, or that puzzle you, then… have another read!

This week's poem is called The Sparrow by Paul Laurence Dunbar.

In the story we read of a song which seems to 'bubble up' out of the earth, and somehow to 'fertilise' it. Here, in the poem, a song comes from another kind of visitor, in the shape of a little creature who comes down 'from above'.

The question here is, once again, can we hear it – even through the pane of glass that separates the inside from the outside?

The Sparrow

A little bird, with plumage brown,
Beside my window flutters down,
A moment chirps its little strain,
Ten taps upon my window-pane,
And chirps again, and hops along,
To call my notice to its song;
But I work on, nor heed its lay,
Till, in neglect, it flies away.

So birds of peace and hope and love
Come fluttering earthward from above,
To settle on life's window-sills,
And ease our load of earthly ills;
But we, in traffic's rush and din
Too deep engaged to let them in,
With deadened heart and sense plod on,
Nor know our loss till they are gone.

This visit from the 'little bird' probably doesn't last long at all, and it reminds me of how fleeting moments like this can be. I suppose we could think for example of moments when the sun comes out from behind a cloud, or a rainbow appears in the sky, however faintly. But there is something also about our attention being called to another living thing: like when someone else's child tries to smile or say hello to you in the supermarket, or to tell you a little piece of 'nonsense'. The bird's 'little strain' and its 'taps' might not mean anything that we can quite understand or decode in human terms, but it is an offering, an attempt to reach us in our own solitary situations.

I like the idea in the next verse of 'life's window-sills'. I wonder if we are aware of our own, and of how closely things might come to rest just on the other side of where we are. It is a homely image, and we might be inclined to think of the window-sill as a rather insignificant prop in the context of a house. But this poem encourages us to think of the life-giving potential of noticing that we have them. 2020 may have trained us to look at what others have left in their own windows, with rainbows of all kinds being shared in communities across the country. And yet there is a hint here of the repeated offerings that we may find around us, that actually do not require any effort from us at all.

We've left this page blank for you to make notes, draw a picture, have a go at writing yourself or jot down something you'd like to tell us…

As well as reading materials, we've also included a puzzle for you to have a go at while you're having a cuppa.

This week's challenge is to see if you can find the names of the different birds that one might be able to spot in British gardens at this time of year.

V N S A N L N B H M E P Z N D
E C I Z R T B C B R U O Q U F
U C Z B I O N B E S L M L T L
D T Z T O I H D E Y B N S H A
H R A G F R W S G N I W X A W
M P I L O I D H G D G B Y T K
V K L B N L Y K A R V X G C M
T U O G K E D L S J W B N H Y
B R D Y K C F F B A C O I D R
U V K X F P A L I B B C L U Q
U T N I D V I L H N H H B K X
C D B K P X E B B U C E M H M
P Q N C H A F F I N C H A G F
H D Q O Z D U C X C Y T R T J
D J S L Y X G P P P J V B I R

BLACKBIRD
BLUE
BRAMBLING
BULLFINCH
CHAFFINCH
GOLDFINCH
NUTHATCH
REDWING
ROBIN
TIT
WAXWING