

WE'RE GOING FROM BAD TO VERSE

The New European · 22 Feb 2018 · Article 50 by Kelvin Corcoran is published by Longbarrow Press in a handstitched, limited-edition pamphlet, priced £5.

Poetry is about reflection and consideration and with each day bringing yet more horrors as we career down the road to isolation in our own neighbourhood, opportunities for reflection and consideration are in pretty short supply these days



Poetry is, by and large, still scratching its chin over Brexit. But, as CHARLIE CONNELLY discovers, it could be about to go BOOM

While Brexit-related fiction is beginning to seep on to the shelves, its sibling poetry is taking a little longer, it seems, to get to grips with the most calamitous political, social and cultural upheaval of the modern age.

That's not necessarily a bad thing, poetry is about reflection and consideration and with each day bringing yet more horrors as we career down the road to isolation in our own neighbourhood, opportunities for reflection and consideration are in pretty short supply these days.

Yet we need poetry to help us make sense of the world and in particular to make sense of Brexit. Or at least to let us know if it is actually possible to make any sense of Brexit.

The Irish writer and poet Julian

Gough once wrote "Poems are the landmines of the culture, one can lie dormant for decades," and there are plenty of examples delving back into the English canon that seem apposite today.

Recently I picked up AE Houseman's A Shropshire Lad again, a work of which I'm a bit of a fan even if it is rather a mope-athon from a poet who was by all accounts a committed and enthusiastic misery-trousers.

Leafing through the cycle recently its melancholy, elegiac tone did seem to fit the road to Brexit and taps into that ennui we feel at not really recognising our own country any more:

Into my heart an air that kills

From yon far country blows:

What are those blue remembered hills, What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,

I see it shining plain,

The happy highways where I went

And cannot come again.

There are similar echoes in

Ozymandias, Shelley's description of the smashed remains of a giant statue to a long-forgotten mighty leader of a great land rendered barren by catastrophe that is certainly a poem for our times.

"My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings," reads the inscription on the plinth,

"Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

The poem ends with a description of the desolate surrounding landscape "round the decay of that colossal wreck" and quite frankly a copy should be pinned on the wall of every Brexit blowhard as a valuable lesson in the catastrophic consequences of hubris.

A couple of Brexiteers are already known for their poetic antics, with mixed results. On the eve of the referendum UKIP'S Steven Woolfe introduced Nigel Farage at an event by reciting a poem he'd written himself called England's Beaten Heart, an impenetrable thicket of randomly placed words from which you could just about pick out UKIP bingo bankers like 'Magna Carta' and 'freedom'. Nobody was quite sure why he saw fit to do this, especially as it was before he took that blow to the head.

Last autumn Boris Johnson was caught on camera in the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, one of the holiest sites in Myanmar, reciting lines from Kipling's Mandalay including, "the temple bells they say/come back you English soldier", a crassly insensitive thing to do as he was immediately reminded by the squirming British ambassador beside him,

Andrew Patrick. "No," he said. "Not appropriate."

In 2016 Johnson won a £1,000 Spectator prize for an offensive limerick about Turkey's leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan that not only insinuated sexual relations between the Turkish head of state and a goat, but chose to rhyme 'Ankara' with 'wankerer', a far more heinous crime.

The Myanmar incident was a prime example of how the establishment mistakenly conflates education with intelligence: Johnson had probably never even thought about the meaning and context behind Kipling's poem, it was just something he'd had to learn by rote at school sparked off in his mind by his location.

He might have been in an unfamiliar and holy place far from home, but in his head he was comfortingly back in an

Eton classroom being scowled at by his English master.

It would be wrong to get all po-faced about the limerick – it was composed before Johnson was Foreign Secretary and if you start siding with Erdogan on anything, even if he is providing an open goal to make Johnson look an arse, then the territory starts to get dodgy, but it does call to mind Julian Gough's comment about poems being like landmines.

That one went boom.

There have been a few poetic responses to Brexit. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum a poem appeared pasted and pinned all around the Glastonbury festival that brilliantly summed up the mood of the site as tents unzipped and hangovers unfurled that morning to the news that Britain had voted to leave the European Union.

Written by Glastonbury's poet in residence Jo Bickley, the poem said more in 17 lines than most of us found we could articulate in the first postreferendum fortnight.

"It's a day none of us felt less British," wrote Bickley, "as those around us crack open the breakfast wine and call for revolt".

"Goodbye old friend, we'll miss you a lot," the poem concludes after channelling shock into a call to arms, "our little mate the EU".

In those final lines were distilled the shattered hopes of a generation that voted overwhelmingly to remain yet had the freedoms of their futures snatched away from them by their elders.

More recently, in December last year the New Statesman published *The Unknown Hour*, a new poem by Ben Okri that takes the reader right back to a time before borders to demonstrate the folly of Brexit and the petty nationalism that rides happily in its sidecar:

To fall is not to fall
 From space or height. It is to fall from unity,
 From oneness. But it is easier to walk out
 Than to work it out. Easier to fall apart Than to stay together. The romance of independence,
 Of freedom, is stronger than the truth of unity.
 That is why it took us no time to fall
 And all of history and future history To return.

While Okri's tone is one of melancholic regret, the Irish poet Kevin Higgins lampoons Brexit's oafish nationalism in his poem *Exit* from his 2017 collection

Song Of Songs 2.0. Taking the pettiness of Brexit's xenophobic wing to its extremes, he writes:

You'll spend the next twenty-seven bank holidays
 dismantling everything you ever bought from IKEA.

The electric shower your plumber,

Pavel, put in last week will be taken out and you'll be given the number of a bloke who's pure Bilericay.

The best articulation of the post-brexit shock and fallout, however, comes from the English poet Kelvin Corcoran in an exquisitely produced booklet from the Longbarrow Press called *Article 50*.

Opening with the barely-restrained anger of *Rue des Hiboux*, Corcoran distils the rage we all felt and continue to feel at the Brexit swindle. "They were of that class of traitor," he writes, "self-serving, unimaginative".

"Their only skill to make the poor vote for poverty the preterite for abandonment. Oh bury me quietly in Hardy's field."

From France he watches "a social contract of forgotten triumph/turned to spite and Albion absurd" as "time runs backwards to an empire of amnesia".

Johnson, Gove and the rest are roundly skewered in *Biographies Of The Brexiteers*, where the latter is "Michael of the shifty border/with betrayal in his shrivelled heart".

In Radio Logos, “The meaning of an unread binary choice/has changed everything/a future unexamined/picture an island slowly rowing towards America”.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. Article 50 also reminds us of the beauty to be found in nature, the value of friendship and memory and a wonderful tribute to the British poet Lee Harwood who died in 2015.

There's anger in this collection, and rightly so, but it's harnessed and restrained into these meticulously constructed and beautiful poems.

Article 50 gives words to the feelings we all have, distilling our rage into stanzas that channel it perfectly, and ultimately leave the reader with that feeling that still burns deep within us somewhere: hope.