

Twelve River RIPPLES



Favourite Poem

Lighter

by Alwyn Marriage

Look! he said, flicking his thumb
down over the tiny ratchet wheel.
I did, and as the flame rose up, he held
both cigarette lighter and my attention
in his hand.

*Three hundred million years ago, he said,
sunlight absorbed by plants was trapped, dragged
down and buried with them as they died, decayed
in darkness, were compacted holding tight
to sun-squandered energy and light.*

*Geological gestation through millennia
squeezed plant matter into drip
of liquid gold. Somnolent ooze of oil
lay pregnant with power as human life evolved,
until our need or greed or ingenuity*

*released sun's ancient energy to serve
new solipsistic purposes. Godlike,
we lit the sunlight, combusted fossil fuels:
methane, ethane, propane, butane,
sunshine re-born in power.*

Mesmerised by the unimaginably long time-span
and the tiny flickering flame in the darkening room,
my mind turned inside out. *We squander it*, he said.
*We cannot replenish the supply, will leave
no reserve to warm or light those born too late.*

*Like this.....*He blew
the flame out, carefully released the catch
and, lighter poised, flint still, stretched out
the silence as our eyes became
accustomed to the gloom.

Favourite Poem cont.

Close Reading

The title *Lighter* is a word with several meanings. Less dark, less heavy, a small boat, more cheerful, more nimble and so on; but in this case it's a fancy little device once familiar as an accessory to the now discredited ritual of smoking, and available in all good tobacconist shops. Remember them? Such a ritual was often used as a chat-up line between a man and woman. Here, though, the man's mind is not on seduction; instead, he commands her (and me, the reader) to look at the flame; and as we look, he takes us on a journey way back in time to prehistory when plants (and surely crustaceans too, though he doesn't mention them) *died, decayed /in darkness, were compacted holding tight / to sun-squandered energy and light*. He likens the process of oil accumulating below the earth's surface as gestation, *somnolent ooze of oil/ lay pregnant with power as human life evolved*.

In six five-line stanzas with some internal rhyme: *need, greed, released; ethane, propane, butane*; and alliteration: *serve, solipsistic,*

purposes, the poem consists mainly of one person speaking; he holds her (our) attention as we stare at the flame. After taking us back in geological time, we are then brought home to the present day to confront our own flawed, evolved species; the flame becomes a symbol of the crisis we are facing – peak oil – we're running out of fossil fuels, *there will be no reserve to warm or light those born too late*.

But just fifteen years after this poem was written, the environmental *Zeitgeist* has changed: now the main concern focuses not on running out of fossil fuels but on avoiding the burning of them altogether, because of their impact on climate change.

He blows out the flame and we are left in darkness, contemplating a bleak future *as our eyes become/ accustomed to the gloom*.

The message is clear, stark and memorable: as a species we are peering into a dark, uncertain future.

Anne Boileau