

Stanley Johnson

In the spring, the River Exe, which runs through our valley, was in full spate, turning into a raging torrent. Whole tree trunks were washed from far upstream by the force of the water and some of them jammed themselves against the bridge below the farm. Getting out my chainsaw the other day reminded me that I need a haircut...

We may be in lockdown but that doesn't stop the stuff growing. Soon my hair is going to be as long as it was in my student days. My wife ordered some 'hairedresser scissors', which amazingly arrived at our door by special delivery (we are two miles by bumpy farm track from the nearest road). I am not yet ready for the 'snip', but I will keep readers posted.

I feel sure the coronavirus crisis has done wonders for radio. Not long ago, I heard Martha Kearney tell Radio 4 listeners how her father, a distinguished academic and historian, had recited at her own wedding years earlier WB Yeats's lyric poem *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, a superb evocation of nature and tranquillity. Yeats wrote that poem after he first came to busy, bustling London as a young man, looking for work.

Martha proceeded to recite the poem herself. I couldn't help feeling that the whole nation was with her when she came to the final verse.

*I will arise and go now, for
always night and day,
I hear lake water lapping with low
sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or
on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

Most of us, I imagine, have our favourite poem. Mine is Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Ulysses*. At Oxford, as a classicist, I had to read the whole of Homer's *Odyssey* in the original Greek. Recently, I have reread *The Odyssey* in translation. During my student days I was too occupied with the sheer hard slog of studying the ancient texts to appreciate the story fully. But I now find myself fascinated by the amazing tale that Homer tells

of Odysseus's ten-year wanderings as he returns from Troy to Ithaca. If any man deserved to settle down finally with his wife and family, that man was Odysseus. But, according to Tennyson, that is precisely what Odysseus does not do. On the contrary, he tells his son Telemachus that he is going to 'smite the sounding furrows' once again.

*Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.*

'Some work of noble note may yet be done'! Ideas on a postcard, please!

As I write these words my eldest son Boris is, thank heavens, safely back in Downing Street after his close encounter with the coronavirus.

To say that, as far as the family is concerned, this has been a tense time would be something of an understatement. Nationally, too, the Prime Minister's illness and his sudden emergency transfer from No 10 to St Thomas's Hospital seemed to elicit an extraordinary outpouring of sympathy and concern. As a father, I felt both proud and shaken.

I was rung up early one morning by the BBC. What was my reaction, *Today's* Nick Robinson asked, to the news that the PM had left the Intensive Care Unit for a recovery ward?

'Relief, of course,' I answered. And heartfelt gratitude to the NHS and all the doctors and nurses who helped him. But I went on to say that I hoped the PM would take it easy. Convalescence is not just a useful word in Scrabble. It's a vital necessity.

Now that Boris is back in harness, I very much hope that he will try not to overdo it. If you're Prime Minister recovering from Covid 19, the nation's health as well as your own may be in play. Quick decisions are not always good decisions.

As one of Rome's most famous poets: Publius Ovidius Naso (aka Ovid), put it: *Da requiem; requietus ager bene credita reddit.* 'Take some rest. A field that has rested yields a bountiful crop'.

Ovid, not Covid, surely should have the last word?

