

Poems from 'Writing From Home' 2024

In the 2023 National King Lear Prizes, our poetry group was awarded the Group Writing Prize. Sue Marshall was overall winner in the Individual Poetry section for 'A Dance to the Music of Time', and was also highly commended for another of her poems, as were Christine Roberts and Fiona Bennetton. Gaye Jee's Chairman's Prize shortlisted story, 'The Lithopaedion' was also included in the Group Writing Prize.

These are the poems composed and read by our group at our music and poetry event on Saturday, 13th April, 2024.

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Laura Appleby

1 Should have said "Goodbye"

Arm in arm
 around the stripy wooden walkway
 dribbling ice cream -
 hers a strawberry
 mine a chocolate -
 elbows bending
 in and out, in and out
 like flailing wings,
 sharing licks
 of the other's flavour

We prance and dance and giggle -
 finally collapsing down
 in a smeary, sticky
 heap of six-year-old
 excitement -
 counting drips pooling
 along arms and legs,
 landing eventually,
 (Oh how funny is this!)
 on each of our
 twenty shared bare toes -
 all of them pink or brown.

I remember the sky
 polished a cut-diamond blue,
 the sun slicing
 blades of shadow
 across lifeboats,
 across the big black
 funnel of the ship,
 across us.

We watch the sea pulling itself
 apart -
 cutting its wake

into the
inky depths where
shoals of flying fish
and porpoise leap like hopeful
birthdays through a
scissored lace of
trailing fabric - torn,
left far behind.

Next morning there's a grinding
and a mighty set of thumps as
the great ship docks.
She gives off groans -
shuddering at her own
resistance to the
grating land that holds her
strapped and captive
while she births her load
of people.

They stream along
her narrow gangway,
to Mumbai,
(Bombay then),
melting in the sun -
all of them pink or brown.

One of them's my friend.

I spot her from up here -
even though I'm far away,
watching the river of people
dropping down and down,
while I remain -
just watching and not getting off.

I still spot her though,
even though she's
nearly invisible
beneath a floppy hat with
strawberries round the rim.

I scream her name, and wave.
 She looks up,
 waves back.

No-one had told us -
 we should have said "Goodbye".

Jan 2024 - Revised Feb 2024

2 Batemans: If Only...

The whisper in the old lime, the dimpling on a pond
 where goldfish glide and water lilies spread
 their blessings like round prayer mats
 from some hot and arid land
 where sun shines bright and empire hasn't set.

This is the best of England, Best Beloved -
 this high, green rolling Sussex Weald.
 This is my Home, my centre, my heartfelt place of ease,
 where oak trees shade the dappled stream and mill,
 where the wild rose and the buttercups can breathe.

While here, Oh Best Beloved, I lost my only son
 when he left us all one high and far off day -
 with the roses all a-drooping and the leaves soon going brown -
 to fight for King and Country far away.

If only, Best Beloved, I'd cried, "No John - Here's best!"
 If only Glory hadn't dimmed my sight,
 If only he had lived, along with all the rest,
 If only he'd not perished in that Fight!

Then here would truly be the best of England, Best Beloved,
 this high, not far off, rolling Sussex Weald:
 my Home, my only centre, my heartfelt place of ease,
 where evening shadows drift across the field,
 and scarlet poppies wave, and the dragonflies spread Peace.

3 Walled Garden: (Somewhere in Paradise)

I've always wanted a walled garden,
its brick-redness matching
the blood pumping
to and from my heart,
my breath the breeze
singing to the trees
around it, whose
network of branches
and leaves bring oxygen
and newness
into my quiet space.

Warmed by the sun's rays
reflected and absorbed from
all its walls, everything
growing here
would be beautiful -
even the slugs.

I'd divide it into four,
like my heart - with
arterial ribbons of wildflowers
flowing under arches
of red roses and indigo clematis
while songs of
thrushes, blackbirds,
blue-tits, starlings,
and fieldfare rise up
in a spray of sweetness,
and robins hop about
its rich brown earth.

In the middle of the
four chambers
of my heart I'd have
a round pond of white lotus lilies
and golden carp.
More roses - everywhere -
and fruit such as

fig or pomegranate,
pregnant with warmth,
perfuming the gentle air
with exotic possibility.

At least four cats,
(the sort that don't go after birds or fish),
lounging, lazy,
furry-quiet - and
super-charged with heat.

I actually have
one shady, northbound,
brick-built wall
between
us and our neighbours -
along which grey squirrels
scamper,
pigeons roost,
and cats lie in wait
for smaller prey like songbirds.

Three more walls to go -
(somewhere in Paradise).

March 2024

Fiona Bennetton

1 Hanging On, Trying To Let Go

Under her feet the tilting deck; the huge Ocean liner floating on the great depth of water beneath it; the five year old can feel that mass of water moving and heaving below her. Around the small girl groups of passengers travelling to far off destinations. Bunched together, holding tightly on to paper streamers binding them to beloved friends who stand on Tilbury Docks gazing up at the forbidding walls of the liner rearing above them.

The space between ship and shore slowly begins to widen exposing the muddy brown Thames' water; the passengers hang on to their streamers, last physical link with their friends on England's shore. The brightly coloured bands stretch and stretch, tighter, tighter from ship to shore as the great bulk of the liner is tugged down the estuary to the open sea.

The streamers tauten and tauten, some snapping quickly. Their owners drop their hands and wipe away tears as their last contact collapses into the river or onto decks into piles of colour. The small girl gazes at the shrivelled heaps unaware they would become a symbol of partings throughout her life from friends, places, countries.

Hanging on. Trying to let go...a constant trope like a heavy stone on her chest... past lives hanging on to new ventures; dreams filled with memories of old friends, old ways... trying to let go and accept the joys of new beginnings...

2 BATEMAN'S

The following poem includes a quotation from Rudyard Kipling's "Song of the Wise Children".

What I remember
Most is the tranquillity.

A honey-coloured sandstone house,
mullioned windows and six tall chimneys
nestled into its gardens, woodlands and fields
deep in the Sussex Weald. Softly swelling hills
with scattered sheep and happy memories of
chunky grey donkeys grazing quietly on

the emerald fields above the slate-roofed house.

That was the first visit.

On leave many, many years ago, when we lived in Calcutta among the heat and dust and hectic life of that rambling city, surrounded by constant noise; cries of hawkers, wails of muezzins, Hindu chanting; the harsh calls of the ubiquitous crows, endless blasting of car and rickshaw horns. To us Bateman's appeared a paradisaical dream; cool, in its sheltered greenery among heavy trees; cared for and protected over the centuries to become the home of a well-travelled man – born in Bombay - a wise child among *'the sights and the sounds and the smells / That ran with our youth in the eye of the sun.'*

Numerous visits throughout the years.

Bateman's always touching in its tranquillity and the warmth of accumulated lives.

Author's note:

In this poem I have tried to express what a special place Bateman's is to me. That first visit was 60 years ago followed by a long gap when I lived in India and Australia. I returned to England in 2015, to live in East Sussex, which is when the visits to Bateman's resumed. I relish Kipling's poems on this marvellous part of England, after relating deeply to his India poems and writings. The quote in italics is from the Song of the Wise Children, a wonderful poem which totally captures the feelings and experiences of semi-exiles living between two countries.

3 Chameleon

Captured — a glimpse — camouflaged
against grey-green mottled Jacaranda bark.
He is motionless. Only the glittering pinpoints
of jet mounted on his swivel eyes swing around
to reflect the sunlight filtering
through feathery green leaves,
through purple flower clusters,
to focus separately, each by each,
on small prey, on larger threat.

I watch this diminutive dinosaur's progress;

the gently swaying, deliberate gait, so
slow and sure along the dappled branch.

Captured — this miniature dragon does not tremble
in his prehistoric colour-changing skin;
he is motionless, still, cool to the touch —
his skin dry and papery; soft prickle of his feet
delicate on my arm. He does not tremble
but a glimpse of him makes grown men
run in fear, their tribal markings echoing
his patterned corrugations.

His colour changes slowly; it signals
his mood, his reactions, his intentions.
It protects him; he adapts
to wherever he happens to be.

If only a sense of alienation
could be alleviated
by such subtle colour changes.

Diana Hills

1 Vision at Biggin Hill

Let's see the trees, I say encouragingly.
 Small girls squabble, squeak,
 let's go home, walking's boring,
 let's watch figures on our bright pink screens,
 run from room to room in plastic houses.

No, I say, and we climb higher.
 Fields shrink to tiny squares, farms to faint dots.
 Overhead, Cessnas sear the sky,
 white hot strings of light,
 trailing the universe.

Grumbling girls grouse and gabble,
 Nature's for school, come on, let's go!
 Yes, I sigh and we drop through woods,
 carpeted with sorrel like tiny diamonds,
 sweetening the earth.

Then we come to another wood,
 where fir trees soar and sway,
 above shattered birches, dying ashes.
 On the ground, diggers churn ancient oaks -
 a wood of woes.

Girls and birds stop their chatter, squawks.
 Emily cries, I won't go in that wood!
 So we carry her, eyes wide shut
 across amputated branches, stumps of trunks,
 To the safety of the field beyond.

That day she did not see what I did see,
 Running from that colossus of a housing estate,
 Silent, lone, and weeping,
 Emily in white and gold,
 Twenty years from now.

2 The Keepsake

The grand old desk beckons me, says
time to get on with your work tonight,
But I resist and say not now,
Just let me rest and gaze at you.

Once you were a dressing table,
and on your pristine vellum top
shone ivory brushes, combs of pearl,
silver hooks to pull up long white gloves,
alabaster horns for finest velvet shoes
a golden case for ever lighted cigarettes.

But now the graceful owner has no need for you,
as she sits in the shrouded waiting room for death,
Her dressing table abandoned in a shed
for me to rescue, work at home, or so pretend.

Now the desk's lost her sheen, her swagger, glamour,
she's host to the debris of modern times,
computer, keyboard, parking fines,
files of papers long redundant,
inkless pens, dried paint, broken books,
a mirror magnifying wrinkles, crinkles.

The once crimson vellum's lined with leaky marks,
the remains of spilt coffee, instant soup,
red wine making random patterns
on a surface once polished to perfection.
A patch of raw wood exposed here and there,
victim of meals scraped off without thought or care.

Roses painted pink have long since faded,
garlands of leaves grow faint in the sun,
a broken drawer is shut tight forever,
handles wobble, perch precariously.

But I cherish you, ancient writing desk,

You've seen me through much pain and desperation.
I heed your gentle call,
come sit before me and make a poem,
about me, your sweetest keepsake of all.

Gaye Jee

1 A Life in Writing

We're writing up her life.
Her earliest memories are of
her father's intense love
and the burden it placed on her.

Of the cook, the nanny, the parlourmaid
who even then were anachronisms;
of getting lost while gathering blackberries at four years old
and her mother's face when she was found.

And later, of the war
and the school that moved wholesale to Cornwall
where they took over a hotel
and longed for a summer spent on the beach.

She has ring binders for every trip,
painstakingly retyped from her diaries
that she wrote up every day: everything 'lovely'
("You'll have to edit some of them out, dear!")

The safaris, the European tours,
the year in Italy, back in the forties,
when nice young ladies
just didn't.

And India in her seventies
just so she could reminisce with her ancient father
who was born there, the son of the man
in charge of all the elephants in Ooty.

And her married life: every year
from the firm where she met her husband,
to the cottage and then the big house
with the garden that ran down to the river.

We skim over how he left her
alone with three little girls.
We don't go into the hurt,
just that they all moved into a tiny flat and carried on.

Her nine decades are noted down, detailed, photographed.
Maps and menus kept, souvenirs and postcards,
graduation pictures of children and grandchildren,
the order of service for the daughter that died.

From the shelves in the office of her little modern house,
she hands me sheaves of script immaculately
typewritten in the seventies and eighties,
some of which she seems to remember transferring to her computer.

As the monitor comes to life, I see that
the last file saved, from two days ago
is entitled 'Funeral Plans'.
We don't discuss it.

She says, "I want to get this sorted quickly. There isn't much time."
Then she shoos me out
as she applies more lipstick.
ready for her afternoon playing bridge with her girlfriends.

2 A Crack In The Wall

A week after we watched the movie
where the lights went out in New York,
and driverless cars clogged the freeway
while a plane nose-dived into the sea,
we are in the slowing traffic
going north and west of London.

I am feverish, foggy like the weather,
and bad news messages are coming in
from daughters, one too ill to travel,
while the other is also heading
slowly
towards our common destination.

The clouds hover, grey, porous,
cars ahead dissolving into
plumes of spray
where road meets sky.
In the distance, smoke gushes dark and volcanic
from the top of a high rise -
or is it double chimneys
which might not be so alarming?
It's too far away to tell
and somehow as we get nearer,
the whole thing disappears
as though mirages occur
on the outskirts of London
in February.

Planes fly low - too low - overhead,
grey and menacing, as they
pierce the seething clouds.

And the traffic stops

starts

stops.

Then

the signal drops
and it's like our ears are stopped
and a hand has been laid across
our mouths.

We try to call but get the answering service,
so we sit there deaf-mute for twenty, thirty minutes
until, like a drowned hand rising from the water,
a single message comes through -
only to warn of chaos
if we go the way we'd planned.

So we inch across the carriageway

to leave at an earlier turning.
 The navigation briefly comes to life and
 directs us into the dead-end of a hospital campus.

We turn the car
 but are quickly trapped in a back-street
 with roads closed all around us.
 And men in scarves, and hats low
 over their ears
 stream past us as though
 they're trying to reach
 the last transport off the planet.

* * *

On the journey home, I sleep
 as we speed
 along the greasy highway,
 then jolt awake to the sun sliding
 like a hallucination
 beneath a bank of inky cloud,
 its underside lit up
 as if by the face
 of a renaissance Christ child.

And the western sky is
 golden, tangerine, blood-orange.
 A wisp of fog rises like smoke
 between us and the horizon
 while due east
 the remains of the mist
 is transfigured into a broad, truncated
 rainbow.

The apocalypse isn't now after all,
 but it wouldn't take much;
 just as a drop of acid in a paper cut
 can streak up the vein
 to infect the whole arm,
 the whole body;
 just as a crack in a wall

might presage the collapse
of the whole building.

Sue Marshall

Dancing to the Music of Time

As spring unfolds the music starts.

At first it's faint – a distant hum
below the soil as things begin to stir.
And up above the morning choir tunes up
as birds pair off in pas de deux.
As shoots emerge and fat buds burst
the volume grows. A steady beat
that thrums. The blossoms bounce
a bossa nova, tulips a fandango.

The beat increases with the heat
in rhythmic syncopation;
it slowly builds in tempo
from andante to allegro.
And now the dance is wild and free
as nature dazzles its display.
The insects jive, the willows waltz,
the sweet peas dance a polka.

At summer's height it pauses;
draws breath for what's ahead,
a rallentando, the start of a glissando.
The dance has peaked, a surfeit
reached. It's now a sultry samba.

The music shifts as autumn takes the floor.
It changes to a minor key,
the rhythm now off-beat;
a foxtrot or a lindy-hop,
a final fling before the daylight shrinks
and cold enshrouds the ground.

Now winter tiptoes in; a measured minuet.
The melodies are mellower

and movement more restrained;
 a tango or refined gavotte
 with careful steps, precisely placed.

No hurry now.

The year is sliding to a close,
 the orchestra is winding down.
 The dance has reached its end,
 until next year.

2 Ruth and Naomi

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. (Ruth 1:16)

Let me be with you, to soothe you.
 Let me help you, and lose
 myself in your world.
 Let me stay by your side.
 You are my friend, a pearl
 amongst women; with you I will abide.

I will follow you, away from my land
 to be forever your right hand.
 For our connection is a grief,
 far weightier than diverse beliefs.
 Our bond transcends those narrow traits;
 religion, tribe and race.

I pray that our children,
 and their children's children will
 reject the bitter burden
 of inherited revenge, until
 they dwell at last in harmony
 between the river and the sea.

January 2024

3 Lost

Alone, in the night, in the Sahel desert.
No moon, no stars, no landmarks.
Just endless dark dunes of drifting sand,
cold and clammy under my naked feet.

I walk slowly, determined to stay calm,
hoping to retrace my steps.
No-one.
I try a different direction, then another,
hands outstretched like a child's party game,
hoping for a person or a truck.
Nothing.
Disoriented, bewildered,
my breathing quickens, my heart races
and time melts like a Dali clock.

I swivel my head, strain my ears
and stretch my eyes.
Only blackness and silence.
Waves of nauseous panic
flood my body.
I stagger and stumble, feet dragging
through the sand; swinging wildly
left then right in a frantic frenzy
of fruitless movement.

I stop, breathe deeply,
crouch down, hug my knees tight and wait.
My rational brain strains to take hold,
to slow the drumming heart beat that
threatens to deafen me.
I am frozen, my mind floating, adrift from
time, from place and from a sense of self.

Then, propelled by some primeval urge
I run, arms flailing, feet pounding the ground.
I trip, rolling headlong downwards;
sand fills my ears, my nose, my eyes.
My hair is matted gritty clumps.

Somewhere, someone is whimpering,
high pitched moans interspersed with
low-throated gasping sobs.

I shake my head like a stunned cow,
lift my chin and scream.
And again. And again.
I crumble into the sand,
limbs locked, muscles twitching.

And then I see a light.
Distant at first, winking through the night,
approaching slowly.
A torch, bobbing across the dunes
towards me.

October 2023

Barbara Murray

1 A Date with Kipling

Seven of us,
connected by the love of words,
visit Bateman's.
A cornucopia awaiting us on
this unusually perfect August day.

My journey through Kipling's landscape
starts with four dogs' graves.
Hidden in a sleepy corner;
two deserving of carefully carved stones,
the others buried with no embellishment.
Why this different treatment I thought?
More loved? More naughty?
Or maybe more or less motivation?

Moving on along soft paths carved into
summer grass to the orchard,
planted to remember local boys
killed in the First World War.
Among them, John, childhood echoes sensed,
calling to his friends as they ran to the mill
to watch the great wheel turn.

On to the cool darkness of the house.
The screen of Spanish leather
with the ghost of little Josephine standing close.
Kipling's portrait on the stairs
resilient and steadfast as he looks down on us.
Forever present.

We meet at the cafe.
Enjoy earthly pleasures of tea and cake.
Planning the words we will write.

2 The Old Swimming Pool

The way to the pool is overgrown.
 A murky egg shell blue
 just visible from the path
 as I move through undergrowth.

The water, tar black
 clings to the bottom
 with competing roots and ivy.
 Reflections of overhanging trees
 creep across the
 oily surface.

Standing on dead bracken,
 In the February chill,
 I can only imagine
 a gleaming space of clear water
 sparkling in summer sunshine
 as boys call and scream,
 splashing as they learn to swim.

Pink and brown bodies
 like small shiny fish,
 dipping in and out,
 bubbles and spray providing
 a watery camouflage.
 Nymph like, their lives before them.
 Futures like flotsam
 on the whispering air.

Doing bird

He was the sort of person
 you could imagine
 behind a desk
 a French bureaucrat
 for example. with chic glasses and short hair,
 well cut.

Quiet and polite

'Well I've got eight years so
I won't be out for a long time.
It was the parrots you see'

I didn't really see but asked
how that was the case.
it started with a small African Grey
after which he became increasingly
obsessed.
The parrots didn't come cheap and
he went to many lengths to find the money.
Remortgaged his house
where he lived 'happily' with his wife and kids.
They knew nothing.

The parrots became increasingly tempting;
the rarer they were the higher the price,
limitless.

'I got away with it at first.
Working in a bank
I knew my way around the systems.'

Until the day he got greedy,
it was only then that he felt the weight of the law on
his shoulder.

'What was it about the parrots?' I asked,
trying to understand.

'The colours, the beauty, the way they looked at me and talked.
Exotic.
There was nothing else like it'.

Christine Roberts

This is a response to the theme of trees written after returning from France in May last year following a bereavement.

1 Hawthorn

They say 'Don't destroy a hawthorn tree –
it'll bring misfortune –
you'll lose your cattle, your children or your money!
Instead make wine from the flowers,
or jelly or chutney from the fruits
to ease sore throats and upset tummies.

Coming into land
the Sussex countryside gleamed spring green
a dusting of white on the hedgerows
and trees.

From the windscreen of my car a closer view –
the risen cream of may blossom
dripping from hawthorn trees and hedges
in places almost curd-like,
sometimes with strawberry swirls,
and underneath them delicate umbels
of cow parsley catching the tiniest drips
in the shape of minute stars.

Opening the driver's window to get still closer
I breathed in that unmistakeable odour
then closed it quickly turning my mind to
the may tree's symbolism:
fertility, healing, good luck – bad luck,
protection against ghosts and ghouls,
Hymen, Goddess of Marriage, and her hawthorn torch,
cloutie trees near sacred springs and wells,
and then to its other names: whitethorn,
hagthorn, quickthorn, ladies' meat,
to its berries called chucky cheese and cuckoo's beads

and pixie pears, and bread and cheese
 which as a child I used to taste
 but soon spat out.

They say 'Don't destroy a hawthorn tree –
 it'll bring misfortune –
 and there is the matter of those thorns
 a cause of pain and irritation
 yet there to protect their haws...

...which takes me back to where I'd been
 and to my pain which too protects
 by telling me that I'm alive.

Kipling was an early adopter of the motor car though he actually used a chauffeur. He loved that motoring gave him the opportunity to visit 'stupefying marvels and mysteries'.

2 Motoring Home

Starting from somewhere
 English counties slide by
 in slow time:
 a Roman road, a tithe barn,
 an ancient hill fort,
 a church with a witch's hat steeple,
 and wild snapdragons by the roadside.

'Jane', 'Amelia', 'The Duchess' and others,
 each in their own time devour the miles.
 Spitting and whooping, surging and hooting,
 yelling and coughing
 on bouncing springs return their passengers
 from another day of exploration
 and leaving the highways behind
 plunge into a holloway darkened by elms and oaks,
 lurching over bumps and potholes ...

...to the sight of those red brick chimney stacks
 crowning that grey-stone lichen house.

Perhaps there'd been the usual mechanical excitements
 from those ladies: broken springs and magnetos,
 snapping levers, stiffening hand cranking
 from Land's End to Dundee
 and further afield from Calais to the Côte d'Azur,
 then criss-crossing that sad network of cemeteries
 to check the fabric of those tidy flowered dormitories
 had not failed our heroes.

Behind glass now,
 a peacock blue Rolls Royce Phantom sits,
 the Spirit of Ecstasy launching from its bonnet
 ready to discover
 'more stupefying marvels and mysteries',
 while down Batemans Lane
 the potholes
 grow ever deeper
 and across the sea the war dead multiply.

3 Gorgons

A poem about three ladies who petrified me when I was a lot younger!

Aunt Rosa...

Linked forever to tapioca pudding
 and how I gagged when she forced me
 to sit at the table till four o'clock
 till the bowl was emptied
 to the last pearl.
 And how, my parents away at a Ladies' Night,
 she took my 'sucky blanket'
 just before bedtime
 marked my nails with her Conway Stewart pen
 and the fear when I awoke and the marks were gone
 and I crept into my parents' room
 and took my mother's fountain pen
 from her handbag
 and made the marks again.

The Misses Rayner...

They lived next door
 dressed in brown – full skirts and woollen tops
 moving shapelessly in the bay window
 adjacent to ours,
 silent always, the older one frumpy and dumpy
 the younger surely once a beauty
 tall and slender but now with Thirties
 brushed out wiry waves.
 I felt them disapproving me
 so I crouched beneath the window sill
 and crawled across the floor
 to escape.

Mrs Mulley...

A minute lady maths teacher
 concave chest and a dowager hump
 her green tweed suit floured with chalk dust
 thin-rimmed glasses and beady eyes
 which seized on my fear
 shouting from her diminutive frame
 at my inability to grasp equations
 their brackets and symbols eluding my brain
 as a lump of panic grew in my chest
 which re-emerged when my father
 tried to help me with my homework.

These women - Gorgons all -
 fierce and terrible and grim
 emerging from their home – a closely guarded secret -
 the swamp of my childhood terrors.