

# Wolvercote Festival 2015 – Poetry Evening

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Further reading:

John Daniel: *Missing the Boat* (Etruscan Books)

Pushing 100; *Skinning the Bull* (Oversteps Books, 2012)

Jane Spiro: *Playing for Time* (Oversteps Books, 2015)

## **A49: a poem for my sister (*Gillian Somerscales*)**

Musing my way up the A49  
On a mission of mercy to a sister of mine  
The years like the miles roll away down the road  
And I know that I'm going to pay what I've owed  
For a long time.

Wrong turnings, diversions, alternative routes  
Propelled us apart as we each plucked the fruits  
Of our distancing lives from the trees as we passed,  
Two mapless explorers, moving too fast  
For a long time.

Occasionally meeting at crossroads, we'd wave—  
Intimate strangers from cradle to grave;  
Passengers glancing from parallel trains:  
Each thinks they recognize, suddenly cranes  
A neck to look back.

Too long and too far we drifted apart  
Neglecting the signposts sunk deep in the heart;  
No longer a question of just time and place  
Emotional oceans had spread in the space  
Over long time.

Then came the call, without warning, at night:  
A match struck in darkness, a house set alight;  
A stranger in madness, or malice, or play  
Entered her home as she slept far away  
And stole it with fire.

Not much time to think, not much time to pack;  
A car full of petrol, a bag in the back:  
Worcester to Leominster, Ludlow to Chirk—  
It all flows so easily; why did I shirk  
This road for so long?

A day spent in travel, a day spent in thought  
Why was this journey so dearly bought?  
For now she's in trouble, and where should I be  
But closing the distance between her and me—  
It's time.

*Gillian Somerscales*  
22 June 2015

## **Alight here for Victoria: an underground fantasy (*Gillian Somerscales*)**

Poor Vicky cannot see her way ahead  
Along these warm and windy tunnellings;  
She pauses, steps aside, inhales, looks back, and then—  
Plunges further into dust and dark.

Who is she, running quick of foot and breath  
Alongside those who ride this labyrinth,  
Behind the sway and rattle of the ever-passing trains,  
Ahead of every quick electric spark?

Do you hear her feet's uneven pattering  
In echo ricochet and back again?  
Her exhalation in the sigh and seal of closing doors,  
Her thin metallic scream scrape through the air?

What drives her on in panic so to flee,  
or calls her through the pulsing space ahead?  
Does she know the step behind her, hear a voice familiar  
around above below I know you're there—

Or is she chasing safety as it slips around the bend  
Pursuing something lost, or not yet known?  
Or is it strangers of the mind who tread so softly in her skull  
That though she run for ever they will never fade?

Is light behind the goad that sends her on  
Into the darkness past her vertigo?  
Would light ahead be rescue or the blinding final end?  
Will she run to open arms or piercing blade?

A voice imparts polite admonishment.  
Alight here for Victoria. Change for Bank.  
Which way, said Alice? In the empty dark there are no signs.  
Mind the gap between the words and the meaning.

*Gillian Somerscales*  
25 June 2013

## **Beginning a Journey: Port Meadow, May 2015 *(Jack Pritchard)***

When eye-line and water-line,  
eye-level and water-level, equal  
and the bloodstream and the stream  
feel each other's warmth and chill,  
When the body of water  
holds the body of flesh  
and presses it onward  
on the one-way tide of downstream flow:  
Then, the cold water awakens  
and the slow thunk thunk thunk of front-crawl  
gives the river a heartbeat.

*Jack Pritchard*

## **A Cuban love Song (*Rosalind Bleach*)**

Oh I'd give up my Chevrolet, Negrita,  
for the restless switch of your tail, bonita,  
for the twitch of your haunch  
the stench of your hide  
for the ring of the strike of your shoes on the street.As

I perch on the bar of your trap, chicita  
and its wheels lurch and shudder and tip. Maldito!!  
for the tilt of your ears  
and the arch of your neck  
yes I'd give up my silver-winged,  
leather-lined,  
fuel-belching  
stonking,  
shockingly pink  
Chevrolet.

So to you I raise my glass Negrita.  
We'll doze in the sun soaked Plaza, bonita,  
under the scarlet  
poinsettia trees  
as I cool my palms with my two-rum Mojito

*Rosalind Bleach*

## Cycling in the New Forest (*John Daniel*)

Sitting in this New Forest garden,  
replete with eucalyptus and palms, a superior B & B,  
after a day's cycling from Romsey  
with its wonderful abbey and statue of Palmerston,  
stopping at pubs and small churches,  
(Florence Nightingale  
lying in state at Church Wellow,  
surrounded by lamps filled with flowers)  
tea-shops and doughnuts,  
a deer disappearing into a thicket,  
the stone where William the Second  
was felled by an arrow, horses with foals,  
two jays hopping in ferns, an owl, rabbits.

But you have to get off the A31, tv,  
lists of things you're meaning to do,  
you have to disappear into the pedals,  
the panniers holding two shirts and a washing-kit,  
you have to study a map two and a half inches to the mile,  
crawling along like a beetle,  
you have to notice the dates above the doorways of cottages,  
watching the life in a small patch of grass.  
you have to change gear ,  
stock up on bananas in the village shop,  
pretend you can't see the headlines  
still screaming like a patient with epilepsy,  
the witch's mirror crouched in the corner,

push on past it all  
until you reach something  
older, quieter where you can sleep in a house  
with photographs, families, furniture,  
dense, different, hidden on the outskirts of towns  
where you eat a full English breakfast  
and say goodbye, like a real traveller  
in a far-off country you've never quite known.

*John Daniel*

## Cycling to Land's End (*John Daniel*)

When I was 16  
I was keen  
to bike with my friend  
to Lands End.  
The first morn  
we set off at dawn  
saddlebags, maps  
quick-release straps  
and quite soon  
by mid-afternoon  
reached Oxford (not far  
by car  
but by bike  
quite a hike)  
and visited Balliol, Oriel  
the Martyrs Memorial.  
The next day was much worse  
a 126-mile-burst  
to Weston-super-Mare.  
We thought we'd never get there.  
The third day  
we were tempted to stay  
and could hardly move -  
We had worn a deep groove  
in our arses  
not realising how far is  
one place from another  
nor how much bother  
Lynton and Lynmouth are to youth  
in the saddle  
We could only waddle  
up Countisbury Hill  
and had our fill  
of monsters like these  
on trembling knees  
but we kept our will  
hill after hill  
with the YHA  
past Minehead Bay  
until we reached Bude,  
where we got stewed  
on mead, no less  
and fell in the grass  
and slept the rest  
of that day away,  
then by the sea  
at Newquay  
and the last lap  
on our Batholomew map

through towns in a trance  
Hayle and Penzance  
until we passed  
the very last Last  
Post Office and cafe  
selling pixies and taffy  
and stood in the sun  
on the cliffs at Lands End  
and did what we'd promised  
took out our willies and pissed  
off the end of our country  
into the sea,

Brian and me.

So that was that.  
We picked up our bikes and sat  
in the saddles once more,  
no longer sore,  
but hardened and grown  
we set out for home,  
past Bodmin, Liskeard,  
Crewkerne and Chard  
and at Ottery St Mary  
where I,  
starry-eyed  
fell deeply in love  
with three girls at once  
but then they were gone,  
so we pushed on alone  
across Salisbury Plain  
through headwinds and rain,  
Brian on his Dayton,  
me on my Norman,  
past Stonehenge and Andover,  
glad it was over -  
three weeks in the saddle  
with toe-clips and pedals,  
Windsor and Slough.  
We were nearly home now  
to comfortable beds and properly-cooked meals,  
We were fed up with  
staring at wheels  
spinning around.  
It was done.  
We had biked to Lands End.  
We had pissed in the sun.

*John Daniel*

## Deer struck (*Jane Spiro*)

Suddenly it apparitioned in from darkness,  
its russet brush-back clear as touch,  
and we were locked in the brightness,  
each hair clear strikes of diagonal rain,

and I could see the leanness of your  
nearly-grown body in the split second  
my own movement, unstoppable,  
ploughed into your warm animal thigh,

alien, unfair metal  
invading the forest in your head,  
my sprint for freedom downing yours,  
your machine for living cut short by mine.

*Jane Spiro*

## Stranded over Vienna airport (*Jane Spiro*)

what if  
all this circling in the air  
never stopped  
and this stranger  
caught short in shock  
was the last  
to hold my hand  
and the last sweat to break  
was fear

what if  
all the trawling of empty space  
came to this  
and the shiver of a new moon  
was the closing scene

we are all now  
writing our last poems  
from one line home  
to epics of self-confession  
hoping it's like falling downstairs  
that we will dust ourselves off,  
and feel at the end  
faintly ridiculous, no more

we are all holding on  
to the last time  
a whiff of rose lifted in a passing wind  
a spire of music pierced a passing lark  
a baby bundled warm like a bag of fish

and hold our breath  
rolling now against the whiteout wall  
the steel wings rearing and bucking  
eggs in a mixing bowl  
afraid of breaking,  
afraid of spilling  
our pinpoints of gold

*Jane Spiro*

## **From a bus, January 2014 *(Jill Elliott)***

On this dull morning

Everyone is driving on the pavement.  
White vans are ploughing through suburban gardens,  
And Evil Knievel vaults a privet hedge.

A beige saloon shoots from the guesthouse driveway  
Straight into the flight path of its ghostly twin.

At the lights, there's slow-motion kamikaze:  
Vehicles from all sides collide and merge  
And vanish – matter meeting anti-matter.

High in the winter branches, children march  
To the beat of an unseen pelican.  
They disappear – but there they are again,  
Below us on the wrong side of the street!

On the left now, see a red, northbound bus  
Skip tipsily across Parktown's damp grass.

St. Giles. Wheeled vultures gather in the trees,  
Hover and swoop, while disembodied pairs  
Of headlight-eyes blaze from dark college bedrooms.

Time to wake to the business of the day;  
Sifting reality from dreams and truth from lies.

*Jill Elliott*

## Cycle paths (*Jane Spiro*)

1

How my bicycle is a horse  
pawing the mud, unsure  
before taking purchase,  
bumping over the uneven, potholed path  
before becoming bold then throwing its head high  
hair spraying out on the flap of the wind, the rush  
of the breeze and the long freewheeling sweep of the fall of the hill.

2

I love the tongues of the lanes  
and the language they lead me to  
the hedgerows smitten with primroses  
lit up now with bluebells and the dashes  
of dandelions, of lambs drinking from buckets -  
the clamber of their conversation,  
the poems they are.

3

In the field there are three horses -  
one white, tossing its mane like a teenager,  
one framed, frozen, as if cut into sky,  
his long neck an arc of strength,  
his head bent gently to his feet  
where lies a third,  
crumpled, motionless, his separated twin,  
in his shadow like a vow of stillness

*Jane Spiro*

## **At the Lakes of the Clouds refuge, Appalachia (*Rosalind Bleach*)**

All day the freezing cloud lay thick against  
the mountain, blindfolding the dew-lakes,  
stifling the sky.

Yet still the people came:

knots of hunchbacked silhouettes, breasted the rise,  
leading halting children by the hand.  
From North and South and East they'd come:  
scaled Tuckerman's ravine or Odell's cliff  
or toiled the wind-scoured ridge from Madison

Now they shouldered through the bothy doors,  
hair slicked black against their brows,  
fingers white with cold.  
And all were-- huddled on long benches--  
wrapped in wide, rough rugs and  
offered pungent soup in wooden bowls.

They told of hand holds slipping on wet rock;  
of boulder falls and vertigo; and always of the  
blind, white dark engulfing them.

And then the word went out—  
a whisper first and then a call--announcing  
that the cloud had cleared.

And all the people rose from where they sat  
And thronged out through the open doors,  
towards the lakes revealed ahead of them,  
and turned their faces up, and saw  
the rounded sky grown rich with stars.

*Rosalind Bleach*

## Mayflower diary, Dec. 21<sup>st</sup> 1620 (*William Bradford*)

It begane to snow and raine  
and about the middle of the afternoon  
the wind increased and the sea became very rough  
and they broake their rudder .

The storme increasing and night drawing on  
they broke their mast in three pieces  
and their sail fell overboard  
in a very grown sea.

It was very dark and rained sore  
yet in the end  
they got under the lee of a small iland  
and remained there all night in saftie

but they knew not this to be an iland  
till morning – a fair and sunshining day,  
where they might drie their stufe  
fixe their peeces and rest themselves.

On Munday they sounded the harbour  
and found it fit for shipping  
and marched into the land  
and found diverse cornfields  
and little running brookes

and it made them glad to accepte  
of it and they returned to shippe and told their people  
which did much comferte their harts.

*From the log of William Bradford, on board the Mayflower*

## Stephen says (*John Daniel*)

I am trying to understand  
Stephen Hawking's *Black Holes and Baby Universes*

Through the window I can see mountains of crushed tinfoil  
I am still uncertain what holds an aeroplane up

I lift my feet off the floor to help it .  
We left at eleven and we'll arrive at eight

four hours before the New Year.  
It's ten past two in England

I have put my watch forward.  
I shall turn it back to ten past ten,

so the New Year will come quicker.  
There is a General Theory of Relativity Stephen says

where time curves inward like a saddle  
It's possible for a particle to travel faster than light

but time-travel isn't possible Stephen says.  
Imaginary time is at right angles to real time.

Newton and Einstein both missed the expansion of the universe  
Stephen says. My bottom is hurting. There are six hours to go.

Einstein was wrong saying God does not play dice.  
He throws the dice where they cannot be seen

Everything's determined but it might as well not be Stephen says.  
It's time for me to make a few resolutions.

I resolve not to get angry at the computer.  
We'll have two New Years, one in the air, one on the ground.

Perhaps they'll give us champagne twice.  
It's black outside. We are approaching the first New Year.

I walk around lifting my feet  
making my resolutions about the computer

while the black air outside jiggles  
and shakes us all like grains in a pepper-pot.

*John Daniel*

## The Story Of Jeremy, Who Pulled The Communication Cord, And Was Fined A Minimum Of £25 (*Jill Elliott*)

The barefaced nerve of British Rail!  
It makes me shudder and grow pale  
When I consider how the price  
Of tickets never fails to rise!  
But still the young will not refrain  
From travelling about by train.  
Their money must exceed their sense.  
I'll hear no word in their defence!

Now Jeremy was one such boy.  
Oh, indescribable his joy  
At travelling in a railway carriage  
From Chelmsford, Essex, down to Harwich!  
Jeremy, as they left the station,  
Reflected on his situation-  
Most satisfying, be it known,  
For Jeremy was quite alone.  
Not hard to guess the reason why,  
For most folk found the price too high,  
And thus the carriage was deserted,  
But Jerry was not disconcerted.  
He settled down and placed his feet  
(Ah, naughty boy!) upon the seat.  
He opened up his large packed lunch  
And casually began to munch,  
Scattering crumbs upon the floor.  
No one was there, so no one saw.  
He wiped the window and looked through,  
And much admired the passing view.  
He saw the clouds, he saw the sky,  
He saw the fields go rolling by.

At length, at eighteen-seventeen,  
The sun set. Nothing could be seen  
Outside, and Jeremy got bored.  
He looked around, and saw a cord  
Above the door. Oh, little twit!  
He really felt like pulling it!  
But what was this? A warning sign?  
"COMMUNICATION CORD. A FINE  
OF FIVE AND TWENTY POUNDS IS DUE  
FOR EACH ABUSE – AND THAT MEANS YOU!"  
But oh, (I hate to tell the truth),  
This Jeremy, this wretched youth,  
Ignored the sensible advice  
Left there by those who were more wise  
Than he. He stood, he pulled the chain,  
And, horrors! Pulled it once again!

The engine shuddered to a halt.  
The guard exclaimed, "Where is the fault?  
I'll put it right without delay  
So that we can be on our way."  
He searched the train the whole length through,  
"Who pulled the chain?" he called, "Who, who?"  
But soon the answer was quite plain.  
The only person on the train  
Was Jeremy; the truth was out,  
However he might scream and shout  
And say they must have got it wrong –  
The evidence was far too strong.

So Jeremy, to his dismay,  
Had five and twenty pounds to pay.  
To lose so large a sum of money  
Is certainly not very funny.  
How could he now get home again?  
The lad protested, but in vain.  
Far be it from me to disparage  
Parkeston Quai. but really, Harwich  
Was not where Jerry wished to wait  
For days, until his Aunty Kate,  
Collecting him in her Capri,  
Restored him to his family.  
His father said "Never again  
Shall you go anywhere by train,  
At least, until you're twenty-one,  
Ungrateful and unworthy son!"

So friends, do not, however bored,  
Pull the communication cord!

*Jill Elliott*  
(1977)

## Top deck (*John Daniel*)

I can see more  
than I can from a car

fields billowing green  
clouds oyster-white

a kite wide-winged  
over the road.

Toy cows sit down or stand up  
orange leaves drop

blue shadows  
crouch under walls.

Who watches over all this?  
I would like to say God

being upstairs on the bus  
but I guess it's just us.

*John Daniel*

## Transports of Delight (*Phillipa Hardman*)

At the village crossways,  
The king's highway, the open road  
Straddles the restful waterway  
And arches over the humming railway,  
Only a hop from where small planes once flew,  
And ancient cattle tracks criss-cross the meadow.

We are a people on the move.  
On wheels, on wings, on water, we make our way;  
For trade or work, for traveller's joy, we take to the road,  
Dreaming of speeding in freedom,  
Adventuring on the whale road,  
Riding the wind on eagles' wings.

But thronging in thousands, milling in millions,  
We silt up the flows,  
Choke the channels,  
Cross out the sky with transit lines;  
Till only dreams can now transport us  
To that lost world of innocent traffic --

Soaring in fiery chariots,  
On magic carpets,  
Careering in pumpkin coaches,  
Sailing in stately galleons,  
Taking the ship of the desert  
On the silk road to the caravanserai.

I used to dream of flying boats.  
I travelled once on the Orient Express.

*Phillipa Hardman*

## Travelling Light - after Frost (*Jane Muir*)

It's true, the roads diverged, but into three, or maybe four-  
The blue hour hid the ways across the hoar.  
Avoiding, though, the one that, paved and lit,  
Invoked a tedious safety; avoiding, too, the cliff edge  
Half eroded, I took the 'pretty way',  
Mindful, still, that blossom harbours thorns and  
Glades spawn nettles - none the less, intrigued.

Oft on my travels I heard the hum of distant traffic in the breeze,  
And rare was silence, though when damp mists descended,  
My very senses, muffled, lost direction, wended nowhere, nothing.

I spied one sunny afternoon a couple, comfy with a thermos in their car,  
And later came upon a naked twosome spooning in the woods,  
And passing by the backs of homes  
I heard the thump of parties, and the shrieks.  
I saw the bodies strewn upon the beach.

And I, you could say, travelled half the paths and more.  
For, like the sun on windy days, deceptive,  
They intertwined, and doubled back and crossed,  
All signposts dealt in contradiction, I was often lost.

Reaching at last, because one must, a kind of destination,  
A valley seemed to stretch below: its furrows in the distance sketched a tangle  
Undecipherable - my memory falters - did I take this path  
Or that? And who, in the end, decided?  
So in the end, you gotta laugh -  
For this is Choice derided.

*Jane Muir*

**Verses about getting out and about in the - Port Meadow- sort of area over the millennia from the stone age to now. (Lorna Logan)**

*Or*

*Who wants to go out anyway. Why not just go and lie down with a nice cup of tea.*

First were hairy feet, that walked, crept or ran,  
Hunting, or fleeing, deer, wolves or even man.  
Early boats upon the river, and fast swimming if you can.  
Then there was the horse that could gallop or pull carts.  
Canals stay here forever, and then trains were very smart.  
Then there was the bicycle and tricycles and scooters,  
And eventually the motors- cars and buses with their hooters  
And already we could fly, in airplanes or in balloons-  
Air-Port Meadow saw some deaths and some glory too quite soon.  
The village and the Meadow have seen all of these sorts of travel  
But now Gridlock approaches when it all starts to unravel.  
When development expands, and the roundabouts will choke,  
To travel out of Wolvercote won't be any kind of joke.  
Its back to my old feet- I will just have to hike  
'Cos I don't have a boat and some bugger stole my bike.

*Lorna Logan*