

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. 21st 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