

Poems Read at the Poetry and Music Evening, Monday 20 June 2022

FOOTPRINTS -- Richard Comley

God bless our goings out and comings in, for they make a life.

Footprints up the aisle
As the bride arrives to be given away
Prints of dust from the church path and a scattering of petals
Beside her father's footprints,
Behind come bridesmaids and attendants
The happy step of guests

Footprints to the altar, to the register
The uniqueness of the ceremony and the day
And each footprint distinct

The wedding breakfast and the dance
Patterned rhythmic footprints of joy
Late into the warm night.

In time the bump, the baby
Crawling on all fours
Grows to a toddler
On the beach he tries to stand
Knowing part by instinct, part by imitation
That this is what to do
Keen to be part of the walking world
Stands, staggers, falls,
Footprints, hand-prints, bum-print
Not far to fall, not hurt
Just gets up and tries again, again, again
And little hands in big hands held
Until falling is a rare thing, and then no more;
Footprints become even and assured.

Time passes and the footprints lead to school
Or in and out of car to get to school
Then running jumping scuffling through the day
The classroom and the playground
Walking fighting sliding
Making friends and walking side by side.

Then football maybe, footprints in the mud
Footprints upon footprints
Churned to indistinction.

Footprints give way to tyre tracks, we travel now by car,
Or injury or age puts us in a wheelchair.

Then there is the iron road, the railway
And the vapour trails of planes.

Pilgrimage, the special significance of the journey by foot
Following in the footsteps of many generations back
Silent invisible companions;
Feeling that sense of the places passed through on the way to the ultimate shrine.
Hotels and inns. The sense of companionship that builds along the way.
Each shrine has its own peculiar quality, sanctuary, purpose, aspect of the Divine
Experienced through the feet by whose steps we have arrived
As much as by any other sense. To walk with the saint or with God
For some it is easy, for some a challenge, a trial, tribulation;
That unique experience for every pilgrim, life-changing, life affirming.

Animals make footprints too
Skilled hunters track them (and people)
The slightest disturbance leaves a mark the tracker knows.

At my grandparents' house, a concrete step outside the kitchen door
Across its corner, cat's pawprints preserved for evermore
In the perfect rectangular surface
As the cat went about its ordinary purpose, accomplished in a moment.

Everything we do leaves a trace, however subtle.
Wherever some momentous event, be it happy or horrific, has taken place
Some feeling in the atmosphere remains.
There is that akashic or etheric level of being where everything imprints
And is stored in the vaults of time.

The footprint is the space a thing takes up.

The question of our age: What space do we take up?
We have a right to be here, a purpose in the world
Sometimes overt and sometimes vague and fluid, just to be.
Guilt is pointless, perception is all, and action.

Billions of footprints on the Earth now, the Earth and atmosphere changing
In ways never before seen: To live lightly on the Earth, what does it mean?

Footprints of the pallbearers down the dusty church path.
That part of us that makes footprints is not eternal.

DESTINATION UNKNOWN -- Jill Elliott

What is it doing, this familiar profile
With others dead before I was alive?
Not yet two decades since your baby pictures,
But here's your photograph, aged twenty-five!

I recognise that keen, alert expression.
The clothes and hairstyle, though, are out of date.
Writing below identifies the subject -
'To May from H, with love', in copperplate.

Those gilt-framed portraits of the landed gentry
Which line the panelled halls of country seats
Show tyrants, benefactors, saints and sinners.
Fashions may change, and yet the face repeats.

Were I to step into the Midnight Garden,
Come face to face with my ancestral twin,
Would we share more than physical resemblance,
Me and my double in a crinoline?

My thousand mothers down the generations,
At work when women rarely had a voice,
Were not entitled to job satisfaction.
Dressmaker, cook or laundress was the choice.

Men mostly followed in their fathers' footsteps,
Supplying the East End with boots and bread.
Dozens of tailors, publicans and printers -
Till Frank became a gardener instead.

Once the genetic gazetteer lay open
Numberless routes invited them to roam.
Talent their gold, their passport education:
Some travelled widely, others thrived near home.

Sometimes the path we walk is one well trodden,
Or else it still exists, but overgrown.
But sometimes we must be like Neil Armstrong
With no one's steps to guide us but our own.

FOOTPRINTS -- Paul Surman

Footprints
always feel sinister to me,
uncanny evidence of someone
no longer there.

I imagine a footprint
in a flower bed, beneath
a smashed pane of glass,
and window left open
into a room
where a lifeless body
will eventually be found,

and detectives will investigate
while sunlight and birdsong
enter like intruders,
and a crime-scene technician
takes a cast of a footprint.

I think of those footprints
astronauts left on the moon.
They were the alien spacemen
in geologically dead acres
where absence of wind or rain
preserves evidence they existed
in ghostly footprints.

Will their footprints still be there
when some interplanetary Crusoe
finds them, aeons hence,
long after we have murdered
our own planet;
will he be frightened
or thrilled to see footprints
and wonder whether
he might not be alone
in the moon's world of silence.

SPRING-CLEANING -- Jane Spiro

The professional cleaners are called Be Clean.
They wear plastic gloves, plastic caps, masks -
the surgical crew
at an amputation.

They come bearing
a clutch of crazy-headed mops,
drooping metallic tubes that rattle into life,
wheezing and nibbling at dust.

The house is shocked into submission,
and I into dust-shame.

Play piano says one of the cleaners.
I see from the look in his eyes,
that this is a question.
Yes, yes of course I say.

He peels back his plastic gloves
sits at the piano in his plastic cap,

the keys laid out unprepared
and then a great frenzy is unleashed upon them,

they storm and rage, they become
untidy, they become
the soliloquies of the world, they become
birds burst from a cage,
they become messages that were never sent
they become the names of all the missing parts,
they *become* the missing parts, the everything
that is A – Z, that is A, B, C, D, E, F, G,
what's left when everything else is peeled away,
they become his inner-earth, his tidal sea,
the wild hair under the plastic cap, a smoke alarm
spelling out *This is me*.

[*Hasan Bamyani read his poems in the original Dari. James Attlee then read these English versions. James does not speak or read Dari. He and Hasan enjoy a close collaborative process, working through poems line by line over multiple drafts to find a satisfactory translation. The English versions do not attempt to replicate the formal structure and rhyme scheme of the original, instead concentrating on capturing Hasan's voice.*]

THE CITY I COME FROM -- Hasan Bamyani, in collaboration with James Attlee

Every part of the world
has its seasons
but in the city I come from
it is always winter
with icy winds, volcanic storms

There is snow and rain
in other parts of the world
But in the city I come from
The sky is always
heavy with thunder

In other places
people have two legs
and the birds have two wings
but in the city I come from
some people have one leg, some have none

Even some of the birds have
only one wing
The never-ending war
has cut off their legs
burnt their wings

In other countries people's hearts
pump blood
but in my country
instead of blood
our veins run with fire

Most people, they say
have meals three times a day
but instead of food and water
our people feed on
bitterness and sorrow

We are innocent, but guilty
we are guilty, yet innocent

Now some of us
have had the chance
to escape
to other parts of the world
where there is peace and safety

But the rulers of these lands play a joke on us
They think we don't deserve to live
in peace and prosperity
they are trying to push us out,
telling us to go away

Some people laugh at us
to them we look
strange, suspicious
because we have no smile on our lips
no confidence

To them
we look like
we come
from another
planet

DARDE DELL -- Hasan Bamyani, in collaboration with *James Attlee*

Oh, my friend
let's sit down together and do *darde dell*,
sharing the pain in our hearts
I am imprisoned in darkness—
please shine your light on me
so I can bloom

I was like a dying flower
during a drought—
you gave me life.
By the help of your hand
I will grow strong again
for the harvest

Instead of bracing myself
against the waves
unleashed by war
I would like to rest
for just a few hours
in the calm waters of a lake

Take my hand
be kind
until I manage to
free myself
from the hostile forces
that bind me

I made my escape
from a volcanic realm
where I suffered like Abraham in Egypt
persecuted by Nimrod
Arriving at the River Nile
I wanted to drink a little water

My generation is waiting for peace
as a swallow waits for spring
but peace has come to me here
With your help I feel
as though I'm living in my motherland
and Oxford becomes
Kabul for me

FIRST STEPS -- Jane Spiro

How the world is for the first time
possible to navigate, how it is
a room to cross, from prop to prop

learning speed, how to make it —
the shock of a sudden hurt or this
a soft fall into giving sand

and you never know until you tumble
which it will be, and there's a kind of bliss
in the testing of floors —

in seeing how it is when the running stops,
cut short by ground, not sure which it is,
ground leaping up to hurt, or you reaching down

and when it does, you bite your lip to stop
the crying, or sometimes let the crying
take you by surprise, and then, as if forever

there are hands
sudden hands that lift you up.

A WALK IN THE WORDS -- Jack Pritchard

I went for a walk in the *words* last night - laced up my books
and chaptered across the field
Taking steady pages over the lines of the plough.
I reached the edge of the words
Small verbs, disturbed by my presence rose noisily
And in darkness an adjective adjective noun moved adverbly through the trees

I walked.
Torchlight on the forest floor, illuminating golden leaves like a mediaeval scribe
I am in a dense thicket of proses, catching on the Ps,
But loving no trace, or loving only footprints
Beech branches cast untranslatable runes on the face of the moon.
Beyond the crest of the hill the woodland slopes downwards
Down paths where twisting metaphors break the surface like roots
I sense a notion (an ocean) of wide landscape beyond.

I got lost in the words. Held by paths that entwine, snake back.
I find myself where I was before – proses; footprints; runes; slope
Make a way – write a way - find a story line to take, turn the tenses
Break the block. Take the gap between two words and stretch it
A crumbling brick wall, a brick wall, a brick wall,
Space enough to ease the nib of pen between and write the mortal loose
Then out, out through the orchard and stone gods, to the gardens beyond

In the moonlight a thin rhyme of frost whitens the edges of the paragrass
And I ink a trail of footprints across your carefully manicured mind
Then comes the steady meter of my books on the gravel of the drive –
iyam, Iyam, Iyam, I am, I am
I am trespassing with joy, I am going for a walk in the words.

RIVER WALK -- John Daniel

Yesterday we found the river
deep below the city,

and walked along the sandy road
concrete hard with frost
that dips below the power-house,
its red spindles stuck with snow.
We can't go here, Philip said
But anyway we did and hung above
the sluice watching the black bulge
of water crowding to the gates
they try to close but never manage
quite. The water pushes like
a great black cushion against the doors.

Full of that we walked along the incline
and saw the river, a black stream
with paw-marks faint across the snow.
It's all asleep or dead
No, sleeping.
In the middle the swirls caught still, the scum trap.
Footprints in a vice. *There isn't much that we can do.*

So turned uphill to climb. Roots pulled out, stumps snapped off.
And sheer below the ice and black water waited for us.
I watched them go above me, Ivan, Philip and braced myself
against their footholds. But they didn't look around.
It was me who sweated like a pig, bleeding
feet slipping in my rubber boots
and underneath consciousness of ice
the long roll down. *That's enough of that* I said
as we walked back through the trailer park,
feet holding firmer ground up to the road
where cars whizzed comfortably by.

IN THE DINOSAUR GARDEN -- Phillipa Hardman

Rolling with laughter down the orchard slope,
You spy a gap in the old brick wall
That once enclosed a kitchen plot,
And off we go to see what new delights
Are waiting on the other side.

You pause at the entrance, suddenly unsure,
Strange forests of ferns and spiky stems
Blocking your way. Till look, a path
Winds through the lush Jurassic greenery,
And now you're stepping bravely in.

Your small feet clatter in new summer sandals
Around the bend, and stop. Amazed,
You point at three huge footprints there,
Great toes and talons sunk into the stone.

You sit and take your sandals off.

Treading with care, you put your warm, soft feet
Into the hollow stony shape,
Wriggling your toes to feel its size;
Then, reaching for a steadying hand, you jump
To the next footprint, and the next.

The stone was soft clay when a dinosaur
Made tracks that time would fossilize,
That earth would hide almost for ever,
For us to find – for you, with your small feet,
To dance and play where giants trod.

**ON SEEING A PICTURE OF A BABY FOOTPRINT IN FRAGMENTS OF
ROMANO BRITISH CLAY ROOF TILES FOUND IN LANGFORD LANE EAST,
KIDLINGTON, ACCOMPANIED BY CAT PAW PRINTS -- Lorna Logan**

“Felix!”

Over

On

The

Pristine

Raised

Imprinted

New

Turned

Soft clay tiles spread out to dry,
the cat plunges, on, away from the barefoot calling toddler.
Both leave footprints, making the maker smirk.
He leaves the printed tile and passes it on for firing,
to the Roman roofer, a memory of his son and his cat,
imprinted in time placed on a minor villa roof.

“Cat, cat come back!” calls the small boy running down my garden path
bare feet imprinting only wet grass and mud.

But still cats flee from shouting boys

Time’s footprints echo with their noise.

THE WORM AND THE BADGER – Ros Bleach (*in collaboration with Laura Spence*)

Or Whose Earth is it anyway?

The worm and the badger met one day
on a beautiful pea-green hill.
Said badger to earthworm “your wriggling form
Would make me a scrumptious meal.”

Worm said to badger “inelegant codger
What gives you the gall to eat *me* eat me, eat me?
You haven’t the right to eat me.
You have lice, yes, and fleas, you carry disease,
You stink, you’re not bound for extinction.
Let the DFE cull you, the farmers expel you—
a creature without distinction!”
“What a curious notion” said Brock with emotion
“This woodland belongs to me!
I’m lusty and single and ready to mingle
With gals from my top-secret sett.
My subcaudal secretions are buttery rich
With a quite irresistible scent.
My rump has suave wobble, my snout savvy twitch,
The claws on my forepaws can delve a deep a ditch,
while these stripes down my maw keep the wolf from my door.
Whereas you, Worm, you’re dull. You have no bum at all
You ‘re a featureless ribbon of flesh!”
“OH yeah?” sneered the worm. “This earth is mine!
Without *my* excretions and writhing exertions
This delicate humus would fail,
would fail,
would fail—
Then where would these trees be, would you and your fleas be—
This whole blooming Earth would fail!
Badger ignored him and bit him in two
But worm silently laughed as his uneaten half
Slithered expertly under the soil.

FIND THE ONE -- Jane Spiro

Something is slipping away -
the exact grid of streets
leading from the end of Kiraly utca
where the Roman wall wraps around
across the highway with its intrusion
of traffic to the cobweb
of outlawed lanes, the outside-walls
I loved, where gypsies
and rough-smoking exiles lived-

I remember them with absolute clarity
as if they were well-worn fairytales
or the creased familiarity of favourite shoes
or think I do,
because the streets have picked themselves

shuffled themselves around, shaken up
the habitual with their easy chains of ideas,
and asked me to rethink,
choose a substitute for the memory I search

and again and again
the turnings do not lead to my young-girl street,
and the houses are not quite the one,
not quite the windows, or shutters,
or faded paint on the iron gate,

and though my footsteps begin
to resign themselves
to a house nearly the same,
a street almost there,

my heart is unsatisfied.
There can be no substitutes.
Almost there is not enough.
Find the one, the very one.

VESTIGES -- Phillipa Hardman

Viewed from up here, there's nothing much to see.
The green field sprawls unevenly, with rough
Tussocks and hollows. The Ordnance Survey map
Is blank – no legend in an antique type
To mark where this lost village one time stood.
Only faint earthworks let us trace, perhaps,
The ghostly shapes of longhouses and barns,
Roadway and pond. No vestige else remains.
Six centuries past, this village disappeared
From tax records and tithes. None left to pay.
Sheep flourished in the rich green pasture ground,
Stones from deserted cottages made walls
For fields and sheepcotes. Now these too are gone.
Uncropped, the grass, splashed with bright buttercups,
Smothers with sappy growth the few last signs
Of habitation. From the hedge, hawthorns
Lean in and soon, thickets of ancient woods
May once again root here among the stones.
A gentle breeze blows up the valley side,
The sun is clouding over. Time to go.

ELEANOR -- Leanne McClements

Your tiny footprints in my veins betray
trackways, proving life when life has gone;
no amount of love could make you stay.

My love could forge no anchor to outweigh
the heavy flow of souls that don't belong,
and yet, your footprints in my veins convey

the longings of your migrant feet. I pray
your mother country never did you wrong.
No amount of love could make you stay

where now I trace your relics and assay
your name. Other names beat hammer-strong.
Your tiny footprints in my veins belay

my pain, and where they're bound together may
your name ring bright in fall of anvil's song.
No amount of love could make you stay,

could tip the scales to keep you one more day.
The name they give you is the one that's wrong.
Your tiny footprints in my veins decay;
no amount of love could make you stay.

HOME -- Leanne McClements

The season fills the heart when hearts are grieving
every backward look that caught the snow
or blossom, feet forever leaving, leaving
with the final season fixed in tow,
wed to hours uncertain, and the seasons
grow and sour another language here
the heart can't translate wind or rain or reasons
why that day is turning round the year.
You are the citadel, the burning tower
the sun that rose to throw the earth off course;
the wind will speak in time. Your hands, they flower
impossibilities. You are the source,
the confluence, your feet they froth and foam
a river, always grieving, grieving home.

FOOTPRINTS – Linnea Hopfenbeck

everywhere i walk
i see phantom footprints
everywhere i go
you have been before
and i could walk forever
and still i'd find nothing new
because everything is stained

reminding me of you

UNKNOWN – Paul Surman

Who she was,
and where she came from,
nobody knew.
Only that they saw her,
in the afternoon heat,
many years ago.

She had walked down
the sloping path,
next to the red brick wall
covered in magnolia,
past flower borders,
the cypress, the cedar,
classical urns and sundial,
a huddle of dark pines.

Past where the spray
from the ornamental fountain
had darkened the path,
and shepherdess, nymphs
and satyr gestured
from stone plinths.

She was lost to sight
near the ruined church,
and was never seen again.

Gardeners straightened up
from what they were doing
as she went on her way.
They would never forget her
but couldn't explain why.
She looked old-fashioned
they said, and was smiling.

MO(U)RNING – Linnea Hopfenbeck

Waking up
Wrapped in
Caught in old sheets
Like a fly in a web
A chrysalis of cotton
Smelling of yesterday
Reaching out

Unfurling your spine
Creaking bones
Unused but worn
Feeling
From your toes to your fingertips
Waking with the sun
To get up
And get on
Taking your body with you
Until you are young

NEW YEAR -- Merryn Williams

Tired of arithmetic lessons, when the grey clouds
opened, some winter morning years ago,
I'd gaze out at a new clean playground, longing
to be the first to tread on that pure snow.

But, quickly, other people's footprints criss-crossed,
churned up that marvellous sheet; the white turned grey;
sweet-wrappings, slush were all was left; the ordinary
seeped back. We'd dream of one more snowy day.

Now it's New Year; the rockets blaze; my diary
spreads white, untainted pages. None regret
the last twelve months. Those years of heavy winters
deleted, gone from mind. A second start.

THIS IS THE MIRACLE -- Leanne McClements

This is the Miracle

This morning
I heard a song thrush through
my open window and I was unclothed by loud
phrases and homesick, green shoots
emerging beneath my feet and growing up,
spreading over white tiles and the walls were
green-thick and the ceiling flowered and fruited
with birdsong, and I stood in the filtered light which
makes snow holy in winter, for a moment, when the world
disappears in silence and breath pauses at sun's mausoleum
to pray over what cannot be undone, before little pilgrims begin
to emerge and footprints disperse across the drift. This is the
miracle. Spring never tires of throwing off its shroud and rising
to summer, whose fast phases close over footprints and the things
we bury without pause. The sheets I laundered long for human contact.
Wrapped up, there is no metamorphosis until skin emerges, unclothed,
smooth and silvery and dark as rain drops, rising to lips' slow
praises; lace-web spiders, weaving patterns over
walls, strum silk
threads of desire,
and songs disperse
like spiderlings.
This is the miracle.
Not the framed
footprint
I cling to,

but the ones you leave behind,

This is the whole joy,
This is the whole joy,
This is the miracle.
and the thrush is handing to me,

APPENDIX – Further Poems

TRANSCIENCE – Wendy Davies

The day we went to Bottom Bay
I took a photo of my own footprint in the sand.
The sea was too rough for swimming
but we jumped high with the breaking waves
when we caught the right moment.
And when we didn't
the surf bowled us over
hurling us into the shallows
on hands and knees.
Months later
I look at the photo with a kind of tenderness
for the dent of five small toes
which could almost be a child's.
Nothing about it to indicate
just how many decades have passed.
Or how long it would stay
before the tide washed it away.

TIME'S FOOTSTEPS -- Paul Surman

How time doted on you, always
in the background like a smiling uncle
as you made attempts to stand upright,
and stagger into first footsteps.

As you grew, you played games
with time. It was especially good
at hide and seek, you never saw it
until it's footsteps fell in with you
when time was teatime.

Its footsteps slowed down
and it dawdled with you reluctantly
when it was time for school;
was your best friend,
joshing with you, challenging you
to catch it if you could,
when it was time to go home.

Time's footsteps were with you
as you walked towards its ceremonies:
marriage, the birth of new people;
then, as time passed, you walked slowly
to burials, time's fallen shadows.

Slowly darkness grew in your limbs,
and time raced ahead as your footsteps
grew more uncertain, and you needed
to take your ease more often.

Sitting on a bench, hands resting
on your stick, you watch time pass.
Self-important time, all the time
in the world time, fun time,
noisy time pass in a pageant
of time's footsteps, and you know
that it had all just been time passing,
and you smile at the time
your own footsteps were once spent
in the beautiful rush of it all.

You rise unsteadily from your place
in the shade, and totter the first few steps
homewards, for the time being.

THE MIST – Paul Surman

I stood very still
among the stark tree trunks,
against which a drifting mist
collided silently.

The dark outlines of trees
simplified everything. The mist
was time passing, eternity made visible.
I was softly transfixed,
I was trees and mist.

I was drifting away from myself
into the minimal wood,
into reality as a dream.
I was hushed into its quiet,
the appalling beauty of it—
bound to the blankness of mist,
as to the great amnesia.

My reason was numbed
by the implausibility of being
and not being. I mimed
a struggle to escape the moment,
and the trance broke.
Walking away through the trees
I was only the sound of my footsteps,
but that was enough.

The moral high ground: a hill-walker's guide

It's a long way up to the moral high ground
As the earnest and well-meaning have invariably found;
The arrogant, of course, have long claimed it as their own,
While the cautious and uncertain pass it by and soldier on,
Eyes down.

At first the path seems clear and the direction plain enough;
And even when it narrows and the ground gets rather rough,
The gradient is steady and the climb is not too hard,
So you pass the turns marked 'compromise' with cheerful disregard,
Pressing on.

Along the way you'll see some others pause and stop to think:
Is their equipment quite correct? Have they brought enough to drink?
This trip might take some time; perhaps the map was out of date,
Or the path has been rerouted round some gentleman's estate:
No admittance.

But once you're past a certain point you feel the bit between your teeth,
As you stride from stone to stone, ignoring all the mud beneath,
Find the wind exhilarating as it whips around your face,
Impervious to cold, or wet, or heat – it's now a race
To the top.

By now you've quite forgotten what you left below at camp,
You have all you need up here, your certainty a lamp
To light you up the last steep pull, a constant beam of gold
Shining on and straight ahead to the summit where the bold
Will stand.

But it won't illuminate the drops to either side, so sheer
That you daren't look down lest balance fail and poise give way to fear;
You can't afford to let your mind stray now – you're nearly there,
And whatever you can hear must just be phantoms in the air,
Nothing real.

And finally the sky is clear, and here you are – on top;
The summit underneath your booted feet, at last you stop.
You gaze far out and down – is that your old world, below?
How distant it all seems, and how very long ago
You left.

But as you breathe in satisfaction and inhale the mountain chill
A sudden lurch disturbs you and you find you can't stand still;
The far horizon seems to tilt, the view is in retreat;
You can't get purchase on the ground, there's slime beneath your feet
Oozing up.

It's as if the world up here is slipping sideways, sinking down,
As if it cannot hold your feet in place upon this tiny crown
Of earth, or grass, or sand – in fact, what is it where you tread?
As you anxiously look down, indeed, you see it start to shred
And shift.

Oh dear. They never told you, I suppose, when you began
How treacherous the goal you sought, how doomed your shining plan;
That though getting there feels good and though the view back down is great—
The moral high ground will never bear a human's weight.
You're sunk.

Gillian Somerscales