

Wolvercote and Wytham Midsummer Festival 2023

POETRY & MUSIC EVENING

Poems responding to the Festival theme:

Round the World

This year the evening was dedicated to the memory of Gillian Somerscales, who tragically died earlier in June from motor neurone disease. Gillian was a regular contributor to the Festival poetry evenings. Her poems and her delightful presence were always hugely enjoyed and she will be greatly missed in the years to come. The beautiful poem she submitted for this year's event was read at the start and close of the evening and appears here.

1. The Whole World

Gillian Somerscales

Blue planet

(from the Earth to the other worlds)

You gave me lapis lazuli and other things
I did not know the names of;

You beat me, shook me, battered me until
I had a shape, a boundary, a place;

Now you are gone, and I revolve alone
Beautiful and blue in sea and stone.

Richard Comley

All around the World

*NORTH is the domain of the rocks and the earth; WEST the domain of the waters.
SOUTH is fire, the sun, and magma at Earth's core; EAST the domain of the air. ABOVE
AND BELOW are the polar regions.*

THE SPEAKER: Earth is a blue pearl, spinning in space, poised so delicately, so precisely in that place which allows the particular forms of life that inhabit her to thrive: those of her grey green variegated landmasses, deserts, forests, farms, her light and dark spaces surrounded by the oceans, garlanded by wisps and banks of cloud all around the world; evoking feelings of wonder, mysticism and love from any astronaut. Embodied by the Goddess Gaia she is sentient, her consciousness enfolds that of humanity and yet is much more, for humanity is but one life-form among countless.

NORTH: A grain of sand and a mountain each have their own form of sentience. Climb in mountains and feel their majesty. Walk in forests and breathe in their sense of presence.

WEST: The seas and rivers feel that which is in and around them. The creatures of the sea have great intelligence, civilisations of dolphins and whales; now frequently distracted and disoriented by noise and communication-systems of the human world, all around the seas.

The micro-worlds of coral are bleached and killed by warming and pollution, huge islands of degraded plastic become novel hosts to small sea creatures: a world transforming.

SOUTH: The heat of summer rises everywhere to new heights; wildfires growing in ferocity all around the world. Heat-bubbles form in the Arctic, warm as European summer.

ABOVE AND BELOW: Our ice-caps melt. Bright heat-reflecting snow becomes dark heat-absorbing water. Sea levels rise.

SOUTH, NORTH AND WEST: Magma explodes from the core, shifts vast tectonic sheets of rock. A sea-mountain rolls across the ocean, landfall is obliteration: plant, animal, humankind and its constructions, everything.

THE SPEAKER: Gaia's revolt? As Death comes like a thief in the night, so the ways of these things are hidden deep.

Humanity, most self-aware of the species on Earth, holds the balance of its future direction. Can it rise to the challenge of seeing *all* as aspects of *the one*, and turn collective creativity from self-aggrandisement to selflessness? Or will we, like the legendary techno-wizards of Atlantis, in decadent disaster lose control of our civilisation and plunge to oblivion? Gaia will live on.

Laurence Binyon (read by Bill Clarke)

'O World, be nobler for her sake'

O WORLD, be nobler, for her sake!
If she but knew thee what thou art,
What wrongs are borne, what deeds are done
In thee, beneath thy daily sun,
Know'st thou not that her tender heart
For pain and very shame would break?
O World, be nobler, for her sake!

2. Two Worlds (past and present; rich and poor) or One World?

Jane Spiro

The Roman wash-house

They wash feet here
down in the damp stone
below the street, washing-place
where the water runs along sluices
from rusty lion mouths
unsettling the dust from crusty pores,
cool runnels, unstoppable.

We do not know who we are meant to be
but our feet do, the water does,
Greek, Roman, Arab, Turkish, Portuguese-
a thousand years of washing,
unwrapping the layers of city cloy,
the colours of skin, joining all of us
in its rush back to earth.

Rip Bulkeley

At Home in Hiroshima

Searching for poems
in back issues of peace magazines,
half listening to my daughter
as she laughed with her mother downstairs,
was how it occurred to me to discover
that every day in our everyday lives
is now a hot Monday in August, 1945;
every moment of each person's day is always
a few seconds after quarter past eight in the morning;
every different place we inhabit
is that spreading lattice of rivers and small bridges,
whose quarter of a million people
refer to their home beside the Inland Sea
with a local expression meaning "Broad Island".

Ros Bleach

Nourishment for the heart

1. Manhattan, USA

Jane used to offer me a duck terrine
skimmed with butter glaze
and follow it with chocolate éclairs
in sticky paper sheaths
replete with cornish cream

Was I not healthy?

Tonight she puts in front of me just this:
A heap of lemon zested carrot curls
And plain boiled rice
Spiked with sprigs of parsley in a
clean ceramic dish.
She leaves me hungry.

2. Ahmedabad, India

Early at the morning market
Jyoti feels the child's fingers
fumble for her purse.
She catches the thin hand,
and then she holds it.

"Why do you steal from me?" says she.
"To buy me this week's meal" says he.
So Jyoti heaps a cardboard bowl for him
with yellowing rice, some carrot coins,
and one coriander leaf.
"You should not be a thief" she sighs,
and then she leaves him, lonely.

Inge Milfull

Hands (*after Michael Rosen*)

Their hands
dig and plant,
hoe and weed,
pick and pack,
cut and sew,
wash and dry,
sort and wrap.

Their hands
picked your tea,
grew your coffee,
made your dress,
crushed the sugar cane,
cut bamboo,
painted the dish,
bent the wire.

Their hands
in the wet,
in the dry,
in the heat.

Their hands
hold other hands.

Their hands
do seams,
design,
revive traditions,
learn new skills,
teach the children.

Their hands
feed their families,
work together,
write to us,
write good news,
write bad news.

Their hands
in the fumes,
in the smog,
far away from hospital.

Their hands
go on working,
start early,
need more rest,
need more care.
Their hands
in the dust,
in the storm,
on sinking islands.

3. Languages around the World

Odile Aroud

the gallows

i'd never felt so ugly, so unwanted
till i was sat in that cool changing room.
i'm stifled in that

metre wide box
so wrong and disgusting in there
the mirror held a gavel and an axe, becoming my judge and executioner
i'd been hung, drawn and quartered
in a place
that had barely any space
for two bodies.

baiser du matin de la terre

quand l'aube se lève
je sens que c'est l'amour qui me m'envahir
recouvrir mes paupières
personne n'est là
pour briser le silence
les oiseaux prennent vie comme moi
rosée encore épaisse
sur l'herbe si verte
n'est-ce pas la terre
me serrant dans ses bras un matin brumeux
n'est-ce pas la terre
m'adore si résolument

earth's morning kiss

when dawn breaks
i feel its love wash over me
coating my lids
nobody is here
to break the silence
the birds come alive as i do
dew still thick
on grass so green
is this not the earth
hugging me on a misted morning
is this not the earth
loving me so resolutely

Rip Bulkeley

Venice

Venere sveglia Venezia:
 'Non la preghiera, ma la poesia

vale più del sonno’.

Venus wakes Venice:

‘Not prayer, but poetry
is better than sleep’.

4. Thoughts from Abroad

Rip Bulkeley

Agathoupoli

Not much interesting nowadays
comes down from Skopje. The big stuff
turns left for Salonika. A few refugees
head up the other way, though mostly
they keep inside the EU by crossing to Italy.
But there was someone, back in the day,
little more than a boy, and not our concern.
Didn’t have two words of *dimotiki*,
but you could tell at once that neither he
nor his women would ever lie easy.

He stepped out of the road, said Hi,
sat down about where you are now –
with the pressure lamp hissing
almost as loud as the cicadas –
and stared deep at the sea, like a nomad,
unable to get enough of it, or of us.
Well, the table is still here under the vine,
and if ever he comes this way again
we would take it hard if he passed us by.

Leanne McClements

Algarve

The night I thought of you the wind finally dropped,
and the ceaseless waves lulled the stars from their
watery sleep, flung them up to the clear heavens
where some caught and some fell to light like candles
all out to sea, fishermen awaiting the morning’s trade.

Mussels tasted like pears that night, and The Plough
dipped overhead to spill its starlight onto the beach.
I conjured Casablanca far beyond the shrouded horizon.
I was moon’s supplicant. The ceaseless retreat of days

that follow teach us no more perfect thing about love.

The night I thought of you I remembered the wind
scorching through lucid streets. Bright oleander
emblazoned against white walls. Houses turned inside-
out. I try to conjure your face. Orchards of red earth
swallow oranges and lemons and figs like gemstones.

Cormorants dive and crabs clamber over rocks to find
their next meal. A dog keens after a flock of gulls. Rocks
emerge from the sand like skulls. Water cedes to land
and land to water, ceaselessly ceding one to the other,
embracing then retreating. Not your face, but your face

in the moonlight, with me in it. I wrote you a postcard.
No regrets. Dying waves spill gemstones like secrets,
abandoned in perfect little circles in the wet sand. The
promise of you comes to me on the wind like the taste
of salt. The wind is a prayer echoed in the cries of birds.

Paul Surman

(by kind permission of Oversteps Books)

Cold

The elders sat around us as indistinct as ghosts
in the gloomy silence of their meeting house. Outside
in the clear air, you could see your footsteps
still picking their way across distant snow-fields.

It was cold in summer in the old stone house
that smelt of distant peaks. Their shaman questioned us
with wit, then sullen silence, his faint natural electric
turning our skin unnaturally pale. We felt light-headed,

putting it down to altitude, and our lives floating loose
inside the vague shape of the sentient. Later,
when our nerves were close to hypothermic rest,
young women came and wrapped us in bright cloth.

It felt exotic, but we missed the faintness of English stars,
smoky rooms in backstreet pubs, people getting off
early evening trains, orange street light's trance-like stare
at where the houses end in undeveloped darkness.

Wendy Davies

As a giraffe

you'd float
glide
your head and neck coming first
through white morning mist.

Under open skies
you'd take the great wide
dusty Serengeti
in your easeful stride

and have no need for a voice. Silently
you'd browse
on thorn and scrub
baobab
and the flat-topped acacia tree.
Giant cow, with no taste for blood.

Swimming with turtles

(1)

The boat's engine, the squeals of 'Look! There!'
the remembered traffic
all along the island's west coast road
silenced
by the hum of the sea. In my ears
a quiet liquidity.

Through the pale turquoise
the bulk of the largest turtle
rises dark
from the white coral
to meet a shoal of pearly fish
and my flailing breaststroke. I can't tell

if it's perturbed – but dreamily,
diagonally,
plying its slow flippers expertly –
it swims off into outer space
right outside my line of vision.
And I must come up for breath.

(2)

It's because I'm here –
nose peppery with cold,

thoughts ticking like the bedside clock –
that I'm simultaneously there
treading water in the brilliant sun
and helping Tumi, frantic with excitement,
put her mask and snorkel on.
She goes under
comes up spluttering
tugs the mask off, tips out the water
pulls it on again, quick quick she must
see them she must she must
see them now.

Paul Surman

(by kind permission of Oversteps Books)

In Montreal

A dog trotting past sniffs the restaurant's
heavy breath of meat and juices, and stops to look.
It is not in the least interested

in the wines asleep on their racks,
or those quick young women whose dresses
flutter like silk against smooth legs, or by the flags

that flap breezily in colder air thirty-floors up
as a policeman pushes a young man in handcuffs
into a patrol car's wide back seat,

and in the square a tired man pulls a full bottle
from a shopping trolley packed with empty cans.
No, this is a serious dog, with things on its mind.

Ros Bleach

A Cuban Love Song

Oh! I'll give up that Chevrolet, Negrita
for the restless switch of your tail, bonita
for the twitch of your haunch
for the stench of your hide
for the ring of the strike of your hooves on the street. As

I perch on the rail of your trap, chiquita
its wheels lurch, they judder, they scream, Maldito!
yet the tilt of your ears,
and the arch of your neck! yes

for these I'll pass up that fuel-belching
leather-lined
silver-winged
stonking....
that shockingly
pink Chevrolet.

So to you I raise my glass, Negrita.
We'll doze in the sun-soaked plaza, amica
under the scarlet
poinsettia trees while
I cool my palms round a white rum mojito.

6. In Memory of a World-famed Woman

Merryn Williams

Homage to Vera Menchik

Washed up from Europe, speaking only Russian,
landed in Hastings, Vera, aged fifteen,
picked her laborious way across the pebbles
by that grey sea where I walked later on.
A round-faced teenager, living with her mother
and sister, English a pebble on her tongue -
but chess is a universal language, her absent
father said. Hastings Chess Club let her in.
Smiling rather than speaking, she caused astonishment.
Men fell before her and were much annoyed.
They mocked but they were out-manoeuvred; several
reluctant males joined the Vera Menchik Club.
Hastings Castle looks down on figures that come and
go, and the endless movements of the sea.
None who played her are left; that board is empty,
kings, queens, red and white pawns all swept away.
Vera, her mother and her sister Olga
died together beneath a German bomb.
Her games were written down, and I repeat them.
Vera Menchik, outstanding champion.

7. Future Journeys

Paul Surman

(by kind permission of Oversteps Books)

Migrant

One day I will fade from familiar haunts,
becoming only rumours of myself.
Even those who think that I exist
will have their doubts. I will appear somewhere else,
a shadow sitting things out. For example,
in some half-imagined corner of the Chilterns,
living in beech woods on a hillside of chalk and flint
where the valley dips beneath the flight paths of red kites.

Or I will leave the familiar altogether,
passing through air and water in a dream
flecked with the thoughts of birds and fish
to imagined America's wilderness, to live down
one of those long straight desert roads you see in films,
telegraph wires strung along a line of poles
to an infinity that seems oddly close. My nearest neighbour
miles down the shimmering empty road,
a taciturn gas station attendant with a past. I will have
my own dirt track leading to its personal wilderness
where a generator thuds in the cactus scrub
and in the heat of my wooden shack
a television flickers on, unwatched,
car chases and talk shows
speaking to the waiting silence.

Leanne McClements

How we let you go

In memory of Edwin (Ed) McClements, 26th November 1977 – 19th June 2023

There is no space for muted song.
We grieve you on your way in shifts,
while starlings bruise the summer
and screaming swifts fork lightning
through sleep. You rest in us,
our hearts are full of the measure.
We sing you on your way.
Stars and seasons will unturn before
swallows stream above the Sahara
like meteors. Whitsuntide green dances
through alarm calls, the flitting grace
of grass in the rain. Every thread is torn,
yet you are set homeward newly-
clothed, unifying language. Love
makes us your disciples, attendant to
this birth which makes the whole world

bright. Yes, this yawning day gifts us fresh
wind and the sun, incontestably shining.

[‘Found’ poem, using some words from:

Dance me to the end of love by Leonard Cohen

Do not go gentle into that good night by Dylan Thomas

No space for tiny dying by Jess Murrain

The Child Dying by Edwin Muir

The Confirmation by Edwin Muir

The Unpredicted by John Heath-Stubbs

Nearing the end of life, a guide for relatives and friends of the dying by Sue Brayne and Dr Peter Fenwick

The borrowed words constitute approximately one third of the poem.]

8. Journeying Round the World, and Coming Home

Jill Elliott

Ooh Ducky!

Damian, the plastic duck,
saw himself as Francis Drake -
Dreamed of sailing round the world.
Not for him bath, pond or lake!

Deep within a huge container
Damian and his chums were stored.
When the storm struck Ever Laurel
they were all swept overboard.

What for some can spell disaster
others deem a stroke of luck.
Thus began the epic voyage
of one happy little duck.

All that year he rode the waves,
cruising the Pacific Rim.
Sharks and clownfish passed him by.
Albatross flew over him.

Next he drifted to Alaska,
to Japan and back again,
passed into the Arctic Circle,
through the Bering Strait - and then,

Frozen in the Beaufort Gyre,
Damian spent two thousand nights:
watched the seals and polar bears,
marvelled at the Northern Lights -

Till one sunny summer morning
ice began to grind and groan.
Warming waters washed our hero
south towards the Temperate Zone.

After many years of roaming
finally he ran aground
on a beach in Massachusetts.
That's where Damian was found.

Whilst a little disappointed
that his wandering days were done,
Damian felt, all things considered,
that he'd had a lot of fun!

Thomas Hardy (read by Bill Clarke)

Geographical Knowledge

Where Blackmoor was, the road that led
To Bath, she could not show,
Nor point the sky that overspread
Towns ten miles off or so.

But that Calcutta stood this way,
Cape Horn there figured fell,
That here was Boston, here Bombay,
She could declare full well.

Less known to her the track athwart
From Mead or Yell'ham Wood
Than how to make some Austral port
In seas of surly mood.

She saw the glint of Guinea's shore
Behind the plum-tree nigh,
Heard old unruly Biscay's roar
In the weir's purl hard by . . .

"My son's a sailor, and he knows
All seas and many lands,
And when he's home he points and shows
Each country where it stands.

"He's now just there--by Gib's high rock -
And when he gets, you see,

To Portsmouth here, behind the clock,
Then he'll come back to me!"

Phillipa Hardman

Circumnavigation

Let us roam the round earth's imagined corners,
You and I, and make a girdle all about the globe
With thoughts of silk roads, ancient salt paths, pilgrim ways:

Silently lingering among the scrolls piled high
In the great library of Alexandria,
To hear the scratched inscribing of the sacred words;

And pausing by a window in Byzantium,
To watch an icon-painter in a shuttered room
Breathe life upon his solemn saints with fine-beat gold.

Weary with wandering, we'll chance on Camelot,
Where welcome strangers feel the warmth of great log fires,
And rest on thick-piled furs, with hypocras and mead;

Then follow the seal track over the Celtic Sea
That laps on Dublin's strands, to stroll among the poets
Conjuring words from the wild air and the green waves.

We'll stop our ravished ears against the siren tales
Of Eldorado, gleaming in the western sun,
Beyond the golden dreams of emperors and kings;

But in the Fortunate Isles, the fruits of paradise
Will fall into our laps, while gentlest breezes stir
The honeyed air, and bright birds flash among the leaves;

Till whale-song, echoing from Greenland's icy peaks,
Will call us north, where giants plunge and soar in sheer
Delight, as shimmering colours arc across the sky.

At last, we'll set our starlight course by thoughts of Home,
Familiar roads, each welcome sight and sound and smell,
The feeling of hearts-ease, knowing that all is well.

Rip Bulkeley

Wolvercote Trains

Marylebone, Brockenhurst... – who cares
where trains are singing their hearts towards.
The passengers are too earnest and upright
to hear them well. Only we, lying here
with our arms full of love, can listen
as trains deserve. Their unselfish hymns
belong to our glory, and boundless desire
them power. Like trains, and with them,
we shall fly round the sun, round the clock,
hand in hand round the island of us.