

Poems For W&WMF 2024 Poetry Evening

Richard Comley *Now, and then*

..or then, and now, and *to be*.
 Earth's rotation no longer determines time, atomic clocks time the spin of Earth.
 We see the hands sweep steadily round the clockface
 Or digital numbers silently incrementing
 And think that time is constant; but it's not.
 By Relativity and Quantum Theory it's variable,
 Space travellers age differently.

Outside of Earth's domain it may not exist, or in a way that's changed
 (As passing through Death's portal to the Otherworld),
 Yet on Earth it's a root assumption; we see cause and effect.

In subjective perception of time NOW is all we have
 We move in the present moment
 Like film through the gate of a projector;
 Future is replication of the past
 If all you do is what you've always done.
The Point of Power is the Present;
 Be bold, choose to do what you love,
 And in that absorption time moves fast, seems limitless.
Focus aids, enables creativity
 Yet creativity is ultimately outside time:
 Inspiration apprehended in an instant takes time to be worked through.

The Arts treat time their own way
 Sculpture and painting freeze a moment: Munch's *Scream* forever echoes silently in our heads.
 Music uses time's plasticity to mould and move emotion.
 Consider the range of pace and feeling
 In each of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*.

Age alters our view of time;
 Accumulation of impactful events, change and loss in corporeal function,
 Shift perspective.

Dream time behaves not as waking time
 Ten years pass in a minute
 Or a minute lasts ten years;
 When in either, the other is unreal
 If they are out of balance, madness follows
 And *Now* and *Then* lose meaning.

Bill Clarke *Wolvercote Now and Then*

I look at Wolvercote as it is now, and think what it was like back then,
 When Ulfgar was here, and what the other old villagers were like, way back when.

Dame Edytha saw the light, to build Godstow Nunnery with all her might.
 To celebrate, she invited King Stephen and his queen Matilda with many a knight,
 Also came barons and earls of old,
 With coloured bunting and flags unfold.

King Henry the Second loved our Rosamund the Fair,
 Two sons for him did she bear.
 Henry built a tomb for her when she died,
 But nobody knows where she was laid.

Elizabeth the First did twice stop here
 To be greeted by Oxford's great and good,
 With joy, music, and fun,
 With trumpets, flute, fife and drum.

King Charles the First raced through with his tail on fire,
 And David Waters, to stop the Roundheads, burned his mansion that they did desire.

King William the Third was the last royal that came to see what Wolvercote was like,
 But he was a Dutchman, so he may have come on his bike.

We had many a pub – the Boot, the Crown,
 The White Hart, Red Lion, and the Plough,
 For villagers to drown their many a sorrow,
 With the happy pleasure that they can use a different pub tomorrow.

We also had lots of shops to buy groceries – meat and bread,
 And all things to keep the village well fed.
 We also had, all for our fair lasses,
 Hair dressers and makers of hats and dresses.
 But we now only have one shop, and lucky to have that,
 And all because of a big fat rat.

We had farms to give the village work in the past,
 But by 1840 these farms started not to last.
 The land was used to build houses that were bought
 By people outside the village with a different thought.

The first mill ground the corn to make the flour for its village bread,
 But changed to make paper, with a different thump and tread.
 The paper was used to make beer bottle labels,
 And to print the first world-wide Bibles.
 The land now has flats and houses that were built for more
 People, both rich and poor.

One small room was our first school to teach;
 As the village grew, a new building was built for our children, their potential to reach,
 But the school soon became too small for our new generation that had grown,
 So across the road our small chicks have flown.

A canal came first, and then the railway track –
 Wolvercote had two stations so villagers could go there and back.
 These two engineering feats cut the village in two,

Giving those above a better view
Of those below, and helping them to think they are better than you.

Kate our vicar does her best to save our souls,
All clothed in her ecclesiastical dress.
Kate will give us a new generation who will run across our meadow so sweet,
Before some college covers it in concrete.

We have players, singers and musicians for our enjoyment that are second to none,
With voices, harps, violin, guitar, but no drum,
With plenty of wine and beer that does flow and run and run and run.

I stand in the same spot and think of generations to come,
And wonder if they will look back at us and be glum.
Will they ask why we did or did not do the things we knew were wrong,
And put things right by being so strong?
Like letting our lovely River Thames be so full of foul stuff, without making a real big fuss,
And continuing still to use our cars instead of the Number 6 bus?

There is one thing that I know they will say we did right,
When we hold the yearly festival, by day and by night,
So villagers can safely play and act the fool.
All week long we have walks, talks, music and joy,
So no matter what age, there is something for every girl and boy.

Or will they look back and say: "This is Now, and That was Then"?
So with your permission, I put down my pen.

Jane Spiro *House in my prime*

I returned to the house of my prime,
 to see if I was in.
All the signs were there, the shutters
threaded slat by slat on the kitchen table
by the shutter maker, rolled up
to let in the summer light, as I used to do -

the gate its same battered shade of green,
with the locked box behind
that I had opened daily with such leaps of hope,
awaiting letters from home,
with a small key that seemed so inconsequential,
so easy to break.

Through the iron gate I could see the single step
to the green front door, where once I had slid
and concussed myself on the hardened ice,
and beyond that the fig tree where cats had prowled
with tiger-eyes surveying the tall grass for
the movement of mice.

Yes, it had its times of pure frost

when it was an island on the frozen lake,
and times where it was the only spot of cool
in a baking plate of sun. It was the house
of my prime, when I was flush with
vines and hopes, and growing what I was.

Now it stands between my life
and the life of someone else I do not know
the other side of the holding walls,
dividing us so they on the inside, I on the outside
do not see our common memory -
how much we are joined.

Paul Surman *At Kelmscott Manor*

We shamble from room to room
as if it is us, not you, who haunt
the rooms in which you lived.

You are still more subtle than us:
here but not here. I think
I see a glimpse of you
fleeing along a corridor in my mind.

Then I sense you standing behind me,
or is it to one side, and your
proximity feels like censure.

The day is warm, the sun still shines,
a wood pigeon makes its soft
grey sound, but we've ruined
understanding of what's good.

The clatter and rumble of a Chinook
flying low, leans on the roof tiles,
applies the pressure of noise.

I want to say, come back, Mr Morris,
you have left something in the walls.
I think you called it peace of mind.
Not all the news from here is good.

Julie Hamilton *Pudding* (for Lucy)

Every day at sundown, on the unbreakable plates
a pool of semolina pudding, dusted
with cocoa and sugar, and at the centre
a spoonful of jam. We each spiralled in
as slow as we could: the opposite of a race
to be the last to eat the treat. My little sister

always lost. It seemed only fair
 for the firstborn to savour in triumph
 the sweetest spoonful, pure sticky heart of the pudding.

Forty years on, clearing our parents' house
 we find the unbreakable plates stacked in a corner.
 Who starts it? A pale blue plate flies across the room
 hits the wall, cracks, and falls in pieces
 to the floor. Then we're both laughing, throwing
 and shouting, and the plates crash round us.
 You see? Not so unbreakable after all.
 Goodbye plates. Goodbye house. Goodbye
 semolina pudding.

Merryn Williams

Poem for Ruth Bidgood (1922-2022)

You told me how, in 1941, you
 walked with your boyfriend quietly through Port Meadow
 not far from Thames, and watched the nesting moorhens,
 not talking much, not asking what came next.
 You vowed you'd write, you did exchange long letters,
 and he survived, but married someone else.

And now it's 2022, and war
 again, not that it ever stopped, or will.
 I see them, lovers clinging to each other
 in tears, before just one gets on the train –
 the young men not allowed to cross the border –
 and time winds back, the scene is just the same.
 Two students walk, him with his call-up papers,
 and you, a girl the age of Sophie Scholl,
 across a field of memory, and it darkens,
 and I'll remember, though your light grows frail.

Danhwi Yoon

Old Friend

My friend,
 Was I ever so doomed to keep you in a portrait of my life in the past?

40:60 ratio of yellow and blue,
 but mostly of you;
 I separate myself into two:

from the box of my memorabilia stored under my shelf
 and that amnesic daylight who guides me
 to step into the footpath we've once crossed dearly

many a time
 many years ago.
 Am I that mime?

Mimicking the pleasures of old times
 merely to remember what it was like
 when you were mine

I illustrate with basic colours
 to show you where we left off:

from simpler times
 our simple minds intertwined

Perhaps you too
 knew that sense of familiar doom
 washing over our futile plans for the future

and I'm not talking about the far future, but the near one
 the one right before 18 –
 when you should have been back –

with a shared dream
 and a two bedded room

the one where we tried to make logical
 even if we knew it wasn't entirely practical

Old friend,
 Was I ever so doomed to have met you inside a time capsule?
 You know I've been ruminating about you

for you to wager
 how our telepathic pager
 wasn't merely a myth

and I wasn't merely a drift
 in your wind
 for - your course - it's changed

we're now estranged
 and time,
 has ever so slowly set us apart in our other worlds...

Leanne McClements *The Anniversary*

It is I who became grief, as large and distant
 as a planet, and grief orbited me. At its pull,
 beadlet anemones bloomed red in rock pools
 twice a day, and common limpets clung,
 anchored and untroubled by their purpose
 or my lunations, which receded and replenished
 while I, as observant and superstitious as
 the ancients, searched only for signs of you.

The ancients, carving symbols into bone
and rock, reckoned time in the same way
I began to account for love, for words said
and unsaid, deeds done and not done,
the conjunction of our lives. We were a
solstice sunrise, as dazzling and brief as
Neolithic alignments. This annus versus,
the year turning, returning yearly to this day.

The Egyptians observed the heliacal rising
of Sirius at the annual inundation of the Nile.
Venus was tracked at Chichen Itza. The Inca
hitched the equinox at Intihuatana. And we,
we were a solstice sunrise. Where are you,
my love, while I turn through every season?
Are you the anemone, the Sun, are you
Sirius, are you Venus? This annus versus,

the year turning, returning yearly to
reconcile the heart; where you stand,
beckoning, bringing me home.

Paul Surman *Hoard*

*Didcot and Chalgrove coin hoards—
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*

is wealth pulled drawstring-tight
as a hunched miser counting
and recounting their suspicions.

But in the museum, free of soil's
airless enchantment, it is
a soft-lit scatter of bare metal.

Coins, artfully arranged,
appear to spill from a broken pot,
a tight-packed hardness, loosened,

by sudden disembowelment.
An old currency's new worth seen
through secure plate glass.

We imagine the hands that hid them
belonged to a being the colour
of breath, made entirely of thought.

Think of them meaning to return,
taking a last furtive backwards glance
at what might be nobody, or us.

Julie Hamilton *The digger and the dog*

Their homes of thatch and wood are gone,
 their clothes, their songs, the fine hairs on their arms
 glinting in sunlight, the scent of sweat and smoke,
 decayed, dispersed, relentlessly
 recycled. But what cannot be lost:
 a hole in the ground. A ditch, posthole or pit,
 filled fast or slow with soil, and what
 they did not carry with them, dark mirror of their lives.

This pit's so deep it shades me from the sun.
 Here are bones of beasts, cut-marked
 where meat was stripped. A feast!
 I'm six feet underground, grubbing
 in the earth, while in my head explodes
 the Cattle Raid of Cooley: Cúchulainn,
 his flaming dip-dyed hair, the brawling
 bragging heroes drinking from cups
 made from their enemies' skulls. All dust.
 Below, a slower fill, then at the base
 a dog laid out, the hind limb of a horse.

This dog. Male, medium size, not whippet
 or wolfhound. His head would press
 against your thigh, as you slip silently
 into the deep wood's woven shade. Spring,
 the fresh of the morning, scenting boar.

Look closely. The skull is missing teeth;
 the rest are polished nubs. He's too old
 to crack bones tossed from the table.
 Someone fed him, maybe pre-chewed his meat.
 The right eye-socket has been smashed
 and healed again: someone cared for him.
 He's arthritic, stiff in hips and limbs.
 This senile, limping, one-eyed hound,
 your hunt companion, your friend.

The three sorrowful loves:
 The love of a man for his wife, who will grow old
 The love of a man for his son, who will outlive him
 The love of a man for his dog, who will die before him.

Phillipa Hardman *Caught on Camera*

"Ready? Now!" The shutter clicks; the moment's fixed.
 A century and more gone by, it's found
 Among the long-forgotten photographs
 Boxed in the attic, waiting to be cleared;
 And instantly I'm captured by the scene.

Who can they be, these serious, silent people,
 So carefully positioned under the trees
 In this small garden, in a sunny spot
 Between the trellis and the neat edged border?
 A dozen dining chairs for the front row,
 Where bridesmaids in pale frocks with satin sashes
 Flank the bride – their sister? – and her groom.
 And these must be her parents: polished boots
 And well-cut costume worn with quiet pride.
 Three rows of ladies' hats, wide-brimmed, and piled
 With flowers and ribbons. Hardly any men –
 Groom, father, parson; one lad at the back
 With epaulettes and bright brass buttons.
 At the front, a Persian rug laid on the gravel,
 Where sit two children, staring at the camera –
 And suddenly, I know that frowning boy,
 That glowering girl: my father, four years old,
 With his small sister, hot in her Sunday best.
 Their mother, with direct gaze, stands alone,
 Her husband far away in uniform.
 This is high summer in 1918,
 My Great-Aunt Rene's wedding, she (who'd live
 To be a hundred) fresh as her bridal flowers
 Now, at this moment, in her plain silk gown.
 I look again, and think perhaps I see
 In their still faces signs of loss: the son
 And brother, lost in action two years since;
 Husbands and fathers, unseen for so long.
 Then, in that moment, they were not to know
 The war would end before the year was out:
 1918 did not, for them, yet mean
 The Armistice, their menfolk coming home.
 Or – is the gap of time a trick, lending
 A fictive pathos to my backward view?
 The soldier and the girl beside him smile;
 The two cross children keep their distance from
 An older cousin, sitting poised and cool
 With lacy collar and his perfect hair;
 The baby on its mother's lap's a blur
 Of frantic hands, while she serenely sits;
 A face peers dimly from the shadowing trees,
 And other eyes look sideways – but at what?
 Their 'now' resists my probing, and my 'then',
 Heavy with knowledge of their afterlives,
 Falls powerless before their confident selves.

Leanne McClements

Making shortbread on the last day of April

It is the afternoon, and I am sifting flour.
 The frosts have passed, and I lifted
 a big green bowl onto the table

spread with linen and little sprigs
 all over. The rains have passed,
 and I am carefully measuring sugar.
 I am rubbing in butter as a big green
 bus takes lonely people into town
 to buy this sudden sunlight,
 the golden buttercups in the long grass
 by the park before they are mown.

I put them all in. Birds are speaking
 beyond my window; listen,
 if you don't catch the words and
 put them in they will be lost,
 and suddenly there is shortbread
 on the table where there was none,
 soil fine as breadcrumbs where there
 was stone. The shortbread,
 fresh from the oven, is as miraculous
 as a flower. I have this, my children
 around me, clamouring for shortbread.
 I catch their song and eat it,
 and it tastes like spring.

Jill Elliott

Little Things

Back in the damp, dark morning of the year,
 even teenagers were abroad before
 the work-shy sun saw fit to shake a leg,
 spending much of the day lurking in clouds
 and sloping back to bed mid-afternoon.

With most of the Dawn Chorus still on leave
 the music started late: a single chirp –
 silence - then the first tentative response.
 Others, infrequent, muffled, far away
 greeted the short day with a brief aubade
 And slowly through the gloom, dim shapes emerged –
 roof tops, bare branches, nearby hedges,
 all reconnecting us with the world outside.

But there was one rare, rainless morning when
 an arrowhead of dark, determined birds
 shot across peachy-pink southeastern sky.
 Where they were bound, or why, I could not tell,
 but such bright moments, like the sudden glow
 of hellebores and snowdrops after rain,
 shone out from the prevailing monochrome.

Midsummer sun wakes early, hardly sleeps,
 eager to scale the south face of the sky
 and gaze out from the summit at midday

on ripening fruit and happy seaside folk.

Half the year's still to come, but spendthrift June
has ransacked Nature's treasure chest to throw
lush swathes of green over each tree and shrub,
turns up the heating, and the music too,
engaging, for the daily overture
the entire Avian Philharmonic Choir.

This wealth of colour, energy and light:
how soon we grow accustomed to it all,
no longer noticing those little things
which in the winter gave us such delight.

Ros Bleach *A woodpecker on my telegraph pole*

This one-time dinosaur, this barred and spotted bird
has just flown in to top the creosoted pole
by no 47, on my street.
Angling on either side of him his landing gear –
his outsize, four-toed, grip-tipped feet – , flaunting
that scarlet undercarriage, that black and red flashed hood,
arrogant, secure, he sidles round to reach
the plastic junction box and flings his hammer bill at it.
He ricochets, he rat-tat-tats, he drums.

Above him wires are whispering with syllables and scripts
streaming in and out from who knows where – Bangkok, New York
the guy next door – while he
raps out his own particular encrypted code
across millennia, over the roof slates of these streets
and on, to rivals in the willows by the swamp.

John Daniel *Conkers*

When I was young
conkers were old, vinegar-faced
dangling from gallows
baked, swung across thumbs
taut as a bowstring,
lives reckoned in battles,
splintered and quartered.

Now I am old, conkers are young
cradled in cribs
of white velvet, vulnerable,
mahogany jewels
in brown and green shells
giving birth
on the earth.

Liz Van Santen

An Extract from *The Unfinished Symphony of Love*

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Unfinished-Symphony-Love-Liz-Santen/dp/1739630963/>

‘What makes you happy?’

‘I love to think about when I was very young. Everything was much better then. I was carefree and I had a lot of freedom to play out in the street with the local kids, just going home when I was hungry. I climbed trees and made dens with my friends. Yes, life was good then... I loved being outside, running and playing in the fresh air. We used to tell each other scary stories or play in deep muddy puddles. I was always filthy, caked in dirt after a day out with my friends. Dad would be grumpy but Ma used to throw me in a steaming hot bath and sing to me.’

Annie smiled wistfully. ‘My favourite song was all about a baby swishing down the plughole; we used to howl with laughter.’

‘How did you feel in those early years?’

‘I felt safe... I knew I was loved. And yes, I felt happy.’

In the afternoon, the clouds had cleared and the sun was shining. Annie thought she would take the opportunity of the blue sky and spring warmth to enjoy the garden. As she walked across the grass, she felt pain, everything was hurting. Her clothes hung limply around her bloated tummy and every footstep was a struggle.

But as she walked further, she began to notice the abundance of spring flowers. The daffodils were just starting to lose their vibrant yellow and droop, and tall red tulips reached towards the sky. Bluebells had sprung up everywhere, turning the flowerbeds into a deep purple haze. Although these were well-tended gardens, there was a certain chaos and wildness which Annie loved.

She paused to breathe in the heady scents of the garden. As she gazed up at the deep blue sky, she smiled. Today, here and now, everything is beautiful.

Paul Surman

Approximate Horses

He told himself of the road home
he always liked to walk. How
walking along it at night he would hear
owls across the fields, or the scream
of a rabbit taken by surprise in the dark,
but could not remember details
of houses he had passed for years.

He might have spoken of a past love,
how her held warmth was so distinct
from the heat of the day, but he struggled
to recall the colour of her lovely eyes.

He liked to talk of the field he loved,
but even as he spoke of them, his mind
was inventing the colours, and swishing tails
of the approximate horses it contained,
as if his life had only been a dream
that was always fading from his mind.

Julie Hamilton

Father

On your shoulders, high up in the world
 your jacket scratchy on my thighs
 reaching for the glass dome on the top shelf
 where the blue-winged bird took flight

I dreamed I was a mermaid, swam the river

Along the hedges, naming ragged robin
 and the yellowhammer's shout. You could still reach back
 to the pink-kneed lad running to school, and show me
 the world flowing under the grasses in the ditch

I dreamed I was drifting in the green lane

And then you had no boat to cross the water
 and you lived in the last house in the valley
 where kites and ravens squabbled, on a cold hill
 too steep for your daughter to come home

I dreamed you went upstairs and were gone for ever

Hasan Bamyani (translated by **James Attlee**)

Caravan

We are the caravan
 that has left the looted city
 we are travelling
 but we have lost our way

The burden on our backs
 is the powerful weight of history
 the leader of our caravan has died
 and the lantern that guided us has gone out

We are like autumn leaves
 scattered by the wind—
 We are the new-born fawns of the gazelle
 whose mother has gone

When the muezzin calls
 in the early morning darkness
 we are food for the wolves

The wind
 besieges us with snowdrifts
 and we are circled by tigers

Our hands and our legs are broken
 and the way ahead is narrow
 We look to the sky for God's help

but the only answer comes in a bolt of lightning

I went to the mountain spring to drink
but it had become a torrent
I went to find shelter in a cave
but inside was coiled a cobra

I was near death from thirst
I begged for a drink of water from the waiter
I drank all his glasses dry
and fell to the ground, unconscious

After one hundred years
I awoke
and when I looked in the mirror

Instead of a strong
mountain lion
I saw an old, weak cat

John Daniel *Button*

Today I sewed on a button,
I chose it because it has only two holes,
symmetrical, easy to deal with,

my stomach pushing
against the doors of my trousers.
I sewed it on my blue cords,

You have to pause to sew on a button
thread, eye eyes, hem hems.
The needles lie bright fishbones in black.

I make a stalk for the button,
around and around with the thread.
It's a bit of a mess from the back.

Most things are.
My cords are charity cords – I'm recycling myself,
undermining the Chinese economy.

But I've done it, holding my stomach in.
I've sewed a button on to my belly.
It's where I began.

Jill Elliott *Sounding it out*

May! Sit up straight and read your book
What are you looking at?

Blue eyes refocus, finger guides the voice –
C A T.....Cat.

Two centuries have dawned since
Grandma learnt to sound each letter,
and schools have changed in many ways –
not always for the better

But, baffled by unbroken streams of shapes,
this trick I know:
like Grandma, sound the symbols out,,,,
and there is cat : NE- KO.

Ros Bleach *Once and Future*

Before, you'd say '*one day...*' and
my pulse would quicken like
I'd seen through a chink
in the castle wall a land
of plains and hills that
curved to the horizon.

We'd follow on with '*what if...*',
feeling the words trip
off the tongue, or '*shall we?*',
till the phrase rolled round
our greedy mouths ready
for feasts of possibilities.

Today '*one day...*' has a smaller sound
subsumed by the hiss of '*once...*',
slipperiness of '*should have*',
bitter phlegm of '*could have*',
or that weary drum beat:
'*why didn't we do that?*'

Come on! We'll descend the castle steps
and walk towards the open gate.
The next field promises
a shower of catkins. Let's say
'*Let's go*', tasting the lilt of it
from tongue to lip.

Hasan Bamyani *The Kite* (translated by **James Attlee**)

From the sky-touching mountains
fortifications that cannot be overcome
where every rock-face is a machete
raised against the invaders

and torrents that gush
 from the mountain's heart
 give eternal life
 to all that drink from them

Where the blue sky
 overflows with limitless kindness
 and every midnight
 stars sing lullabies in your ear until you sleep
 Where every morning
 the warm hand of the sun
 touches your face and says
 wake up!

From that country
 where there was joy
 from dawn till dusk
 and we danced
 like swallows in flight

We come

In spring we played with kites
 setting them spinning
 like pigeons
 at the heart of the sky
 climbing up and up
 until we saw them no more,
 still holding the string
 that bound them to the earth

Those are the most troubling times for the kite-flier
 when the wind is pulling your kite one way
 and you are pulling it another,
 drawing it in, in, as gently as you can
 so the line doesn't snap where it has been frayed
 battling another kite —
 Your arms are exhausted, your eyes ache
 as you search the sky expectantly

 yes, kite-fighting is a worrying game

In winter there were
 snowball fights
 and skiing in the high mountains
 with frozen hands and cracked feet
 from morning till night
 on empty stomachs
 but with hearts filled with
 happiness

When the snow was

higher than our doors and windows
 we would sit at the table
 with a stove underneath it
 the charcoal covered with ash
 to make it last longer
 that is when we would have sher jangi
 our poetry battles

If I finished a poem with the letter 'S'
 you had to start a new one
 with the same letter
 If you couldn't
 I had to take up the challenge
 until you had
 no more poems
 and I was the winner

There was no
 jealousy
 no hate
 no selfishness
 no greed
 no expectation
 of fine food
 of owning a beautiful house
 or an expensive car
 no make-up
 no mobile phones
 no theatres
 or supermarkets
 no showing off
 no selling yourself
 to other people

we shared our shoes and shared our jackets
 we shared our food, our rooms
 and the contents of our pockets
 our sorrows were shared
 and our happiness was shared
 we laughed together and cried together
 we were each others' sisters and brothers,
 fathers and mothers

One scoop of rice for me and one for you
 from the same bowl
 when it was cold and there weren't enough blankets
 two or three would huddle under the same one
 the sky was clear and our hearts were clear
 everywhere there were angels
 our houses built from mud were more beautiful
 than the White House in Washington DC

Then an army of bears invaded
 with tanks and artillery on land, helicopters and jets in the sky
 raging against our mud houses, setting our paradise on fire
 putting men and children to the bayonet
 We saw our village crushed
 beneath the tracks of the tanks
 and our existence, everything, was lost
 making us martyrs, homeless migrants

Our *ghazal* became red and our *qasidah* became black*
 My kite hadn't the strength to fly
 helicopters carried out manoeuvres, dropping their bombs
 kites, pens and verses, all were burnt
 We picked up guns
 to drive the bears away from our houses
 at the price of 10 million orphans, widows
 and cripples

Now the bears are gone
 but the black ghosts of stupidity and cruelty
 fill the gap they left—
 the city of love, kite-running and joy
 has become a slaughterhouse
 where the butchers party on our bones
 Apart from fire and smoke and monsters
 there is nothing

A monster grabbed me by the throat—
 I thought my time was up
 Suddenly a strong wind blew
 I saw my kite, trailing a string
 I seized it and rose into the sky, escaping the horror
 sometimes my kite dashed me against rocks
 sometimes it dragged me through the jungle
 or dipped me in the ocean

Bearing a thousand scars, I come to you
 Hey, my friend,
 can you put salve on my wounds?
 On my heart, my eyes, my feet and hands?
 I'm crying out, my friend,
 enough is enough!
 I cannot go back to that place of suffering
 ever again.

**ghazal* and *qasida* are two poetic forms in traditional Persian poetry.

Julie Hamilton

O well

O well haven't we all
 been to the woods to hear

the nightingale; haven't
 we lain beside the one
 we wanted to die for
 and heard the sweetest trill,
 the swell of sound until
 it was unbearable?
 Haven't we. Now bramble
 grows where we lay, but still
 today I'll swear I heard
 a nightingale.

Julie Hamilton

Self-portrait as Bus-dragon

I admired the old ladies
 who stomped onto the bus waving sticks
 in moon-boots and flowered skirts
 paying their fares in pennies –
 bus-dragons, I told my children

I wait as the dusk deepens
 to radiant purple, laden with library books
 the wind brushing whiskers and wisps
 of white hair, transfixed
 by the mistletoe globes in the plane trees
 the scent of lilac, so I nearly miss

the approaching bus, lamp-eyed, lit up
 conveyor of dragons to untidy lairs
 of bookshelves and wordhoards, the orange pot
 my mother used, I used, in daily rituals
 spells that bind a family and release
 the fledglings to the winds, while I
 wave sticks at buses passing by

Leanne McClements

A walk in February

Throw open the door to winter's thaw!
 Grief has bewitched us. We dreamed
 ourselves rabbits under the goshawk's
 claws. All Christmas we slumbered,
 ice in our eyes and in our hearts.
 Arise! Vite! Get dressed! There will be
 mud and miles to walk around the flood,
 but we will hold hands and find the best way,
 sailing over half-submerged lands, walking
 planks like pirates and laughing at Small,
 who slipped and pitched into the ooze.

We tracked down clues and flung ourselves
 on fallen logs in spreading clumps of snowdrops,
 licking warm chocolate from our lips. When sticky

burdock burrs caught on gloves and jumpers,
 Big hurled them at our backs long into the meadow.
 Love mantled cheeks and we held them,
 incandescent; bracket fungus, catkin, squirrel,
 lichen, chaffinch, linnet, blackcap, bud, bulb and
 blackthorn blossom, hip, haw, holler and shout;
 we took them home with silver birch
 to sweep the old words out.

Jane Spiro

Changing shoes

Our mothers matched us
 at six
 at the corner shop

we were suitable girls
 to eat sponge cake
 ride bicycles

and when we met again
 it all came back
 the years

the stories
 laid back to back like sardines
 between bus stops

my shoes were red
 like strawberries squashed
 at the end of summer

hers were blue-black
 two large leeches
 mis-shapen from over-lunching

hers pinched
 mine sprawled
 so we swapped shoes

for a long slice of road
 we spread toes
 in new moulds

and I wore her chemist shop
 two brothers, Dutchman,
 caves and singing lessons

and she wore my lilac tree
 goatskin drum calypso singer
 and broken engagements

Paul Surman *The Twenty-Fifth Hour*

Once you arrive in the twenty-fifth hour,
nothing can be created or repaired.

You will have no imagination
with which to see shadows in a faraway land
stretch across an empty plaza,
where under the sunlight that projected them
an old woman sits, wearing a dark
blue dress, and pale blue apron.
Lines of sweat glisten on her forehead,
her face is mottled with age. She rests
on a dilapidated chair, gazing beyond:
horse trough, balconies,
long narrow alleyways of heat.

You will have no imagination
to see the past she sees;
the coolness beneath trees, the hand
held loosely in hers, as if
she knew it was there to stay.
But nothing exists in the twenty-fifth hour
that allows you to understand the stars she saw,
that night as they walked home together.

She alters her position on the chair, and smiles
at her thoughts. A smile you cannot imagine.

Paul Surman *The Brink*

I must not think of time and darkness,
of the vanishing of woods and stars. Or what happens
when cows graze placidly in moon irradiated pastures—
their thoughts, saturated with light, easily replaced
by the moon's otherworldly idea of meaning.

Forever after they might gaze blankly past me at infinity.
Even time halts under the moon's troubled radiance.
I cannot decide whether there is any such thing
as lunar reasoning, and the surreal cows no longer care
what happens next between this or that reality.

I must not think of time or darkness,
of the vanishing of woods and stars. Or what happens
if time decides to stop and go no further. Or of the self,
isolated in an uncanny light of consciousness.