

Poems read at the WWMF Poetry & Music Evening 2026

Alice Stainer, 'Renaissance'

Listen / you hear fine ribs of stone / that vault and arch and fan to stars / soldering a cage of sound / that holds you not against your will / but from a hope of resonance / so lose yourself in these mazy lines / catch hold of a thread / then let it go / for there are many and which will lead you / deliver you to reasons why / basses grounding / tenors the touchstones / holding firm / countered by alto false relations / asking the questions you dare not / trebles probing the highest bounds / you cannot think that angels sing like this / they do not seek / but annunciate that one concerted purpose / yet fearlessly these voices twine / untwine entwine and intertwine / their figments of eternity / until in a flourish of infinite fullness / the singing is done / and you are undone / and at that crux of perfection / and dissolution / you are reborn / in the twist of a Tudor rose //

Gillian Somerscales, 'Dawn chorus' (read by John Somerscales)

The light is coming now, and to consign the sleepless dark
To new oblivion the singing starts.
Like hands reached out to draw the wanderer in from friendless space
The first clear notes call out the promised day.
I lie and listen, carried into morning
In grateful motionless passivity.
Knotted brain at last relaxing under patient touch of music,
Aching body soothed by sound.
Over the busy chirrups of the sparrows and the finches
Comes the blackbird's proud and prodigal baroque;
Extravagant invention casting brilliance on the sky
Coruscating in the lightening air.
A memory swims up from some time past—
And once again I am on the shore amid
The surprising tenderness of courting seagulls.
And I see the waiting embrace of a swan's wings.

Jane Spiro, 'Silver Thread'

It starts in a damp field, as threads start, too small to see and like the thread that stitches us together where is it, where is it that we need to dig backwards and downwards to find it, and then it seeps out, shows itself in slow moving ditch and it is a muddy thread now, opening up, opening to waysides, wharf streams, and then sixpenny tolls, weirs and locks, to a blossom of names: the measurement of land; 10 Acre, 12 Acre; the naming of copses, Higgins, Cowleaze; the setting of crosses, Margery, Friar's, Tawney's; the manning of woods, Vincent, Marley; the marking of place, breach, clump, ditch, dell; the owning of

farms, Bowles, Wintles, Nichols, Pimm's; the setting of purpose Thrift, Grimm, Cook and Stead; dipping, filling and falling of locks Pinkhill, Swinford, Iffley, lapping under bridges wooden, towered, suspended, waving and solid, to cities carrying your flotillas, imperial swans, soaring lines, stone and steel of business, industry and power and port, out to the losing of names, the great joining, the moon-pulled silver that meets us all.

Jane Muir, 'Our Road'

Limping, folded Oxford Mail from the shop under his arm, old brown coat hanging askew, every early evening - Mr J, long time widowed, one of the first to move into the newly built houses, nods to....

Emily, pruning the yellow roses in her front garden that still bloom every May till September. Tall in her old age, white hair, dark eyebrows- she likes to chat over the low fence to ...

Mrs O out the back by the red tulips, so bent over now, reaches up for the washing line and pegs the clothes.... Over there, lovely Rose, always smiling, younger than the others - it was Mr J, Mrs O, then Rose then Emmy. Brian next door - still haughtily handsome at 96, 'keeping himself to himself' to the end.

Like shadows, ghosts - they're still there if you look. And so are we - more solid, noisy and colourful - not yet our time to fade. Residents change, remembering or not remembering- but the threads are all visible, just. The pattern is ever more complex but endures still if you observe carefully - along the cherry blossom decked street the number six trundles, the stops now only faint worn lines - it rumbles down, a mirage, making the houses shake, almost imperceptibly, at its memory. Black cats - indistinguishably past and present - prowl and stretch on warm pavements, survey the scene from low walls. Look - you can watch ghosts and living beings intermingle unknowingly. Smiles, a raised arm of recognition. Black crows caw and nest immortal on the chimney tops - a shimmering vision of the street, their heads to one side, beady eyed, they are calculating...

Emily's mother knits jumpers for Jaeger- though now her sight is failing - through, round, over, her fingers adapt - the stitches foretell the pattern - the layers and tangles - behind the bay window, Emily's mother knits on...

Stefan Gerrard, 'Tessellation'

The Floor at North Leigh Roman villa

What dreams were tessellated in that home?

A lotus flower and a pair of hearts
entwined, remind the fine diners of Rome.

Four canthari, their constituent parts -
scroll-like handles on pedestal bases
supporting smiles on their playful faces -

set in saltires around a central boss
in which knots criss-cross. The rope-like guilloche
stays Jupiter's thunderbolts. Yet each tile
here was made in the Corinium style.
Each tessera: red, cream, grey, black, laid not
by Roman hands but Britons', local stone
and local brick, lovingly laid to slot
into dreams not of Rome but those homegrown.
In time its Latin idiom declined
Replaced by more prosaic Saxon phrase:
A heathen vernacular, less refined,
Weft from wood, wattle, daub, straw and crude clays.
Peasants picked at the petals, pierced the hearts
No longer actively conjugated
But rather passively subjugated
To their own domestic arts, their parts
Scattered afar across Oxfordshire hearths
Whose flames fanned out their own hypocaust paths
Until now: the floor restored in a guise
Befitting our times, our desire to learn
From those forebears who knew how to discern
Joy under Jupiter's jovial eyes.

Alison McDonald, 'Wolvercote'

'Wolvercote' goes at the top of a page,
I have lived here for years and have trebled my age.
My outlook is perfect, the trains are in view
Beyond them the Common shines with the dew.
The horizon is lifted by the trees on the hill,
The locals who walk there are full of goodwill.
For me, it is the flowers that bloom in the spring,
Which call me to walk and to hear the larks sing.
Walking is healthy the doctors all say,
So put on your boots and go out every day.

Alice Stainer, 'The Dreamcoat'

After Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery's patchwork housecoat from 1934, maker unknown.

She spies it first in one of those glossies
brimming with lithe otherlives:

*the garment every woman will want to wear
from collecting the milk to cocktail hour.*

The fit, the flare, the fishtail and flick!
Hollywood at large in Cricklewood.

He snorts – what with the slump,
there's none to spare for finery of *that* sort.

She says nothing, but by lamplight opens
her workbox, assembles old fragments,

pieces them together night after night
to become a wife of shreds and patches:

muted greens and browns, of course;
a touch of check tightening collar and cuffs;

a row of buttons shunted to one side;
then flirtations of lilac, hints of chintz

and polka-dot frivolity and at the hem,
a spike of carmine daggering down.

She dons it each day to preside –
just as her mother taught her – over

her dominion of frangible cups
and fresh-cut flowers on taut stems.

Later she stands at the window,
smooths its ruffled skirts, gazes out

at the far-off stitching of stars
and they wink at her, one by one.

Inge Milfull, 'Memory's Weft'

My sister brought me four scarves of yours in a bag, freshly laundered.

The loss that had hollowed weeks, months, years had faded over time into the fabric of my life.

Sometimes you blur in the mind's eye so much that I wonder whether, taking shape from you, I ever truly saw you—maybe always stood too close to perceive?

I open the bag.

It is all there, woven in: embedded in familiar blue-grey and cinnamon, released by the softness at my fingertips.

Merryn Williams, 'The House Continues'

My wedding dress is hanging in the dark cupboard;
closed curtains, dry wisteria twigs scratch at the glass;
thin ice cracks on the drive, silver-leaved plants edge the border.
The house continues.

Silver anniversaries come and go; this one, unrecorded.
Silently I force the door and boldly walk upstairs.
That's my photograph, with the baby sister
I lost, but my children are sleeping deeply.

In their dreams, they run into me at stations,
talk a while, pick up a phone and intercept my voice.
Their doubts grow, this feels wrong, they struggle to remember,
then wake up, sweating.

My daughter takes my clothes, discards some, tries out others,
empties my drawers; in the round mirror she looks like me.
Mute, I see her walk away, down that endless passage,
my young self fading.

And I shall know nothing of her, nor my son's history;
did she marry? did he go to war? I have to know.
Dead, yes, I am dead, but my voice continues calling,
tell me, tell me what happened.

John Daniel, 'Button' (read by Jane Spiro)

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.

Ros Bleach, 'Knitting together'

The casting on is done--30 stitches
ready on my needle. Now I loop
the yarn around my little finger
and begin, feeling the wool's soft friction
pull and release, pull and release
keeping the tension just right.

Purl, plain, purl, plain, purl...
a stitch for each short breath you take,
for each completed row,
an episode of suckling.
I will loop and loop the thread
to grow this coat for you, while you
will evolve in tiny increments
until your wandering eyes
rest on my face, and your fingers
reach and touch, melding the fragments
of your world into a shape
that fits you comfortably.

Wendy Davies, 'The sewing cabinet'

Her sewing cabinet opens like a book,
full of stories I know so well. The button box
makes the right sound when shaken. And look,
here are the darning mushrooms, and the fine
darning wool that's prolonged the life
of countless socks and sweaters. Here's a tin
of pins, labelled PINS – and suddenly
I'm standing in a full skirt while my mother
shuffles round me on her knees, carefully
pinning the hem to just the right length
before a wedding years ago. And these
are the scissors that cut out squares of cloth

for patching garments wearing thin. And here's
the needle threader. The strong button thread.
And six silver thimbles with no false airs.

Phillipa Hardman, 'The Distaff Side'

*Cradle, dandle, ladle, candle;
bundle, mangle, treadle, handle;
kindle, thimble, needle, spindle.*

Her hands

Crafting her life's round;
The spindle turning, turning while
The cradle rocks.

Her fingers

Leading and looping the wool,
Fashioning row by row
Warm winter socks.

Her hands

Threading needle and bobbin,
Guiding under the presser foot
New shirts and frocks.

Her knuckles

Pounding the hot wet linen,
Pummelling pliable dough
For daily bread.

Her palms

Smoothing the fresh white sheets,
Calming a child's hot cheeks,
An aching head.

Their hands –

Clotho, her gossips, her daughters,
Never still, ever spinning
Life-giving thread.

*Cradle, dandle, ladle, candle;
bundle, mangle, treadle, handle;
kindle, thimble, needle, spindle.*

Richard Comley, 'Threads'

Threads: strands, filaments, fibres, cords, wires, strings, lines, lace:
Connections seen and unseen.

What can be made from a single thread?

Knitting: Stitched rows, linked atop one another, with creative variation;

Crochet: Thread looped in approximate circular fashion, using a hook; Both finish with a locking stitch, lest they unravel back to straightline thread.

Knots: A single thread of string or rope, to hold, shorten or bind: *Round turn and two half-hitches, sheepshank, bowline, clove hitch.*

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We walk through this world without seeing it;

For most of our rat-run society it's true.

Hear Tatum, skilled in sorcery: *When I see a web, I see a realm...*

Bejewelled with dawn dew drops, refracting rainbow light in gossamer strands. Dead centre, the Spider Queen.

The fly, heedless of danger, zooms full tilt into the mesh, instantly entangled. At once the Queen pounces unerringly,

Makes thread to bind the hapless fly, wings buzzing furiously

In futile attempt at escape, till silenced by the final binding:

Ready to be eaten alive.

--

Consider the trees:

In spring, the many threads of birdsong, living music,

Call forth waking dots of green buds out to full canopy;

From root to crown the sap threads up through the vessels,

As burgeoning leaves perspire drawing more, and yet more, as they grow.

At base of the trunk, roots connect to the mesh of mycelium

The unknown knowing of mushroom, knitting together

under the earth, the forest in its entirety. Trees do not travel,

Yet through this dense connective network sense each tiny movement,

Fauna from smallest ant to trampling deer, and communicate it abroad.

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A mystical silver cord keeps the body, and the spirit that animates it

In lifetime, connected to the eternal Godspark soul

Which sent it forth into the good-bad Earth; forgetting, at birth, its agreed mission, for the sake of freedom of action.

The golden bowl is energy of the spirit-self, Crown chakra, indicating spiritual advancement when a halo. Broken, it is the end of physical life; expressed thus in the Bible, the Book of Ecclesiastes, 12:

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken...Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

Ros Bleach, 'Entrapment'

They saw it shivering on the border fence
at Nixey's field, caught between the bars,
trapped implausibly in open air.

Some greedy spider must have slung
his net across the space,
invading it with gossamer.

They took a stick and swiped around the gap
to break the anchor threads away
and set the captive free -yet
once released it flip-flopped
in lame spirals, aiming no-where,
heading for the ground.

He cupped it, clattering, inside his hands while
she poked in a finger, prised apart
the secret mesh of tissues hobbling its flight.

The creature launched itself at last,
flashing turquoise eyes,
flew out of sight, was gone,

but on one fingertip a stain
of russet wing-scales from its damaged form
remained behind.

Jill Elliott, 'Autumn Encounter'

Hello?! Didn't we meet the other day?
I was just standing there when you swung by,
but lingered, captivated by your grace
as you abseiled that precipice of white

Intently focused on your safe descent
I guess you'll didn't even notice me
for if you had I doubt you would have stayed.
Your kind have met hostility and fear
from those whose living space they dare to share

Today I come across you once again,
not very far from where I saw you last;
at leisure now, sprawling contentedly
till my clumsy intrusion wrecks your peace.

Startled, you vanish, gone I know not where.

Scarcely daring to breathe, I wait, then see
long, spindly legs emerging gingerly
from the interior of the toilet roll.

Those limbs which, by the twitching of a thread,
distinguish between food, foe, and friend
quiver, checking for danger. Reassured.
you scoot to shelter round behind the sink.

But I will tolerate your sojourn there
and your abandoned webs, laden with dust,
mindful of how on chilly mornings you
adorn the hedge with diamond-studded lace,
and toil to keep the summer bugs/flies at bay.

This place is big enough for both of us.
Let us live side by side in harmony.

Paul Surman, 'Still Life Between Shed and Garage'

Today the garden is putting on an exhibition.
I wander between artworks, trying to look intelligent.
Bee Visiting a Foxglove catches my attention
for a moment, then Washing on a Line, with its
everyday feeling of lives hung out to dry
that might be a comment on recent news events.
I stop for a long moment at the minimalist
Empty Plant Pot in Bright Sunlight, its warm
terracotta colour and challenging simplicity, which,
in many ways, I like better than the vastly overblown
Philadelphus Hanging Over the Fence from Next Door.

Then I sit down to take a rest from looking
and see it, and know this is the star of the show for me.
Still Life Between Shed and Garage. I love its artless
arrangement of shapes, unpretentious some critic
might call it, but for what it's worth I love its water butt,
looking as if it has been pinned there by the downpipe
from the garage roof. Beside it a bright red can
of liquid tomato fertiliser, perfect counterpoint
to its bland drab green. Then two watering cans,
spouts crossed in an almost heraldic gesture,
and the uniform algal slab of the shed door

with a glint from its padlock, in sunlight that casts
an angular shadow all the way down to where the edge
of the shed is softened by dogwood, false currant,
and a stray tendril of honeysuckle. My eye is drawn
to where Virginia creeper runs along a hedge top,
then down to an abandoned broken bird feeder.

Phillipa Hardman, 'Stitches in Time'

Layered in tissue, yellowed now with years,
A square of cambric, all sides neatly hemmed,
Unfolds a ghostly garden traced in blue,
Blue as forget-me-nots, yet never worked
With skeins of gorgeous silks to sun-warmed life –
Save for one corner, where an unknown hand,
At some time unrecorded, made a start,
Threaded bright strands of purple, peach, and green,
Stitched lazy daisies, rosebud knots, and stems
Of towering lupins and delphinium.
Was it a soldier, or an airman, who
Found solace in the gentle discipline,
Until, his equilibrium restored,
The embroidered garden scene was laid aside?
Or did a kindly nurse, to cheer and teach
Unhopeful fingers, stitch this corner first?
Folded away, the uncompleted cloth
Keeps secrets still: freighted with faded dreams
Of leisured hours spent stitching silken flowers,
Afternoon tea spread on the dainty square,
A sunlit garden, roses and lavender,
Bright butterflies stirring the perfumed air.

Sarah Watkinson, 'Earth Work' (*with lines from Robert Frost and John Donne*)

You think, as the leaves
go down into the dark decayed
and the woods drip with winter
the world's whole sap is sunk.
But buried isn't dead. You only need
a child's small microscope to see
inhabitants of this fermenting compost;

arthropods, larvae, snails and tardigrades
grazing fungal threads. A seething crowd
inhabits dark horizons underground -

layer on layer on layer of leaf-fall.

In November woods, you might hear

- as if there's somebody there -

a scuffle in the litter. It's only a blackbird
tugging up a worm by one end. Think of his body

as the apex of an upside-down food-chain
ascending from the cold furnaces of fungi.

Down in the earth, their filaments melt fallen trees,
break and reclaim the woody architecture
of daylight and photosynthesis.

*[This poem was commissioned by the Oxford University Natural History Museum to accompany
their exhibition of the Kurt Jackson painting, 'Fungi Forage']*

Mary Easton, 'Family Threads on Water'

An old wooden boat, blue and sparkly

Rests on a calm grey Devon sea.

Tucked between my father's wiry legs

I hold a heavy oar - nervously.

Now I can swim I am ready to row,

A strong arm helps to take my blade

Together we slice and pull on the water,

Threaded drops sparkle, rise and fade.

Kayaking on an African river

My bright paddle catches the sun light.

We are on the Zambezi, dodging hippos

Whilst wondrous Falls hurtle day and night.

Churning and swirling round the boiling pot,

Cascading down to depths below.

We are a mile away from their flowing source.

Against the current I still have far to go!

Two excited children carrying two canoes

Run toward the slow, green River Lot

Splashing in, paddles aloft, they set off.

But these are racing craft, the kids are not!

Light to handle they do nothing but spin
So dreams of gliding by castle and vine
Are lost in their ever-eddy swirling of despair
What to do - we rescue these children of mine.

The Bathing Place abounds with joyful sounds
As the shallow Mill Stream flows on past.
My two grandchildren launch their paddle boards
Into the murky, brown waters at last.
I watch them with some sadness as they leave.
How many more years do we have left
Before our rivers dry and choke with weed
And our Beloved Place lies empty and bereft.

Jane Spiro, 'We are threaded together'

One sister wants it as it always was
the other longs to do things new.

One knows things are false or true
the other thinks life is full of middle grays.

One takes life quietly day by day,
the other sees it in bursts of dark and light.

One feels home is life's first delight
the other loves the taste of the open road

One sees family as the central node,
the other sees the world as an open book.

One needs the peace of the sheltered nook
the other the wild of the wide-flung sky.

Yet they are neither I nor she,
as both are her, and both are me.

Sarah Hardman, 'Threadbare'

Thumbs green from splitting stems, grassy stains on gingham hems
May queens together

Rainbows on our wrists, tiny stripes of knots and twists
Best friends forever

Black gowns flap like crows, silky tassels to and fro
Oh, aren't we clever

Train lines wind and track: in, on repeat, and back
Endless endeavour

Festoons of twinkling lights, clinking glasses, wedding nights
Both joint and severed

Tangled wires like snakes, fear beeps loud and flashing aches
We come untethered

We drift, untethered

Tendrils round our forks, red wine: we talk, we talk,
The words weigh heavy

Quiet steps on winding paths, words to smiles, and smiles to laughs
One more storm weathered

Daisy chains of fragile hope, hold us steady, strong as rope, but
Light as a feather

(8) *And finally....*

Inge Milfull, 'Nothing is totally broken'

Nothing is totally broken;
it is only caught in a long process of transformation.

Everything is totally broken;
we're all still trying to trace the crack where the cruelty crept in.

From day to day,
in every damned moment,
we have to figure out what we might still fix,
with a bit of glue,
thread and needle,
a lick of paint,
and what to let go.

Paul Surman, 'Vapour Trails'

I like to think of them as graffiti by a vast
invisibility, who, latent with excess of power
could easily smash the sky in, leaving just
another broken window, but instead it scores
a thin bright scratch in the cerulean bodywork
of air—the kind of thing you might expect

of a god with time on its hands: secretive being
so naked it can't be seen. This morning it makes
a criss-cross pattern, etched in the acid yellow
of the early sun, then bored with that, allows it
to fade, loosen, fall apart like a dress undone,
exposing once more the bare original of blue.

I sensed it was pleased with this, its trick
of change, but you can never tell with a god,
whose fleeting thoughts can scorch the earth
by accident, set trees aflame, make riverbanks
collapse, cause hailstorm or tempest; with a flicker
of eyelids send flash floods, or dirty tides
racing for the coast to flush the land of humans:
but look at it now, this god of terrible destruction
repeating this same detail like a mind obsessed.

Stefan Gerrard, 'Past Presence'

The bench was dedicated to Dave Frost.
I sat on it and thought, did he know Jack
Who clipped my nose that cold day? My gaze crossed
To the sleeping green patch, dormant and slack,
Where a net of silken cobweb threads spread -
Shimmering like tinsel - and their light shone
Over the ashes of inlaws, long dead.
Was Dave in amongst them? Did they get on?
I looked beyond Farmoor, where once they'd lived.
The reservoir's mirror dazzled and dazed
So the hills in the distance seemed hazed, sieved,
A future not reached: I sat there amazed
By the conjunction of presence and past
On a bench next to a patch spirit-grassed.