

50 poems commissioned in the year 2000

by **David Hart**

Given the chance to commission fifty poems about waiting, I knew there would be no one way of doing it. For a start, two poems I knew already, one from a poetry group meeting in each other's houses, another from a group in a Day Centre. They couldn't have been more obvious for this purpose. Jayne Greathead, with years in and out of hospital, had written this,

*I sometimes wonder what it
would be like to meet God.*

*I'd talk to him
and he'd talk to me.*

*He'd forgive me
and I'd forgive him.*

*But then, just as God was leaving
I'd slap him, just once, hard
in the small of the back.*

And THEN we'd be friends forever.

And Robbie Melbourne had written a list of circumstances with the refrain, '*I think I'll survive*'.

Rogan Wolf had found a poem of mine displayed in the Poetry Society café and asked if he could include it in the pack he was preparing. My memory of what happened after that is a bit hazy. I had been working at West Midlands Arts, as it then was, connecting with Malcolm Rigler on arts in his Black Country surgery. Rogan has reminded me of our meeting there with Alison Combes from the Arts Council in London. Malcolm suggested possible funding from the Kings Fund, and it happened (enough for two years), Alison saw the possibility of Arts Council New Audiences funding, maybe she suggested the 50 poets, and Rogan remembers it was Alison who suggested me to do the commissioning.

Some of the poets and their poems remind me of what was happening back then in my life, some I am still in touch with, some were poets whose reputation already went before them, and two I know of have died, two lovely Caribbean-related writers, Amryl Johnson, who was in Coventry, and more recently Roi Kwabena, for many years here in Birmingham.

The Border Poets, who met in Shropshire, were part of my life then, which led me to ask Roger Garfitt and Miranda Tite. Charles Johnson was there, too, who started Flarestack in Alvechurch hereabouts and is now in Somerset. There was a network connection somehow with Joan Poulson in Manchester, happily.

From my open workshops at Worcester Cathedral there was overlap, too: Miranda, Charles, Judy Tweddle (from the above house group, too, as well as being my next-door neighbour) and Miriam Obrey. Miriam in Worcestershire seems to embody, like no-one else I know, what generations of the now-dead have left alive in language and local knowledge. Another poet I knew via my work at West Midlands Arts was Eleanor Cooke, who had applied herself passionately as a poet and researcher in great detail to an aspect of Shropshire, resulting in *'Who killed Prees Heath?'*.

From the outset I intended my role to be editor as well as collector. After receiving poems, I made suggestions on a few, and came to happy agreements. Only one poet withdrew rather than work on what they had written or send a different poem.

While the subject I gave everyone, 'Waiting', was obvious, it seemed also broad and open enough. It wasn't to be restricted to formal Waiting Rooms, but might be any kind of delay, hanging around, time passing, unavoidable presence that was pleasurable, sad or a chore.

One of my principal aims was to hear voices from across Britain in their native language. This was achieved short of Irish; I regret it still, but I did try, and what a pleasure to have poems in English by Medbh McGuckian and (from within England) Catherine Byron. Is Maura Dooley as Irish as her name sounds? When meeting her a few times I never thought to ask, only knew she was writing poems that matter.

I had Welsh empathies and contacts and was very glad to have poems from Menna Elfyn and Elin ap Hywel, these two in Welsh with translation, and in English from Fiona Owen, Mike Jenkins, Sheenagh Pugh and Dannie Abse. As I look through the poems again, I am even more grateful than I was then that such people sent such poems.

Through my work as a poet in mental health I had met and worked with Miller Mair, and was invited to contribute to a weekend of sessions he was running in Dumfries, which is how I met his colleague, fellow psychoanalyst and poet, Angus Macmillan, who contributed a poem in Gaelic with his own translation. I had heard Edwin Morgan read his poems, well known and praised, while not yet Glasgow's then Scotland's Poet Laureate, and I am moved again by his Tree House poem, from children playing, to years later the passive-active waiting with the structure with memories, 'to capture the high, the uncapturable.' Kathleen Jamie's poems I knew of from her travelling, and still for me she eludes the

Scottish category. She responded with a poem and I was glad of it. Jackie Kay's voice was strongly in my head after I'd first heard it - I had to include her.

With such aims, I had been blessed to have met Debjani Chatterjee. I don't remember the deal we made, and it almost embarrasses me now to think what I asked of her. In or out of Sheffield she went to work and the result was poems:

- by Basir Sultan Kazmi in Urdu
- by Rehana Choudhury in Bengali
- by Rashida Islam in Bengali
- by Usha Verma in Hindi

all with translations by Debjani - the first of these with the author - plus a poem of her own. I knew Mahendra Solanki already and wanted one of his deceptively simple, sparse poems. And here I can put in an acknowledgement of the Poetry Society's help in finding people: Sujata Bhatt, not least, Indian and at that time, I think, in Germany.

The poster poem form allows other languages to show themselves visually as strong presences. No doubt there is more to say about this, more than I am knowledgeable enough to say; I felt sure only that Welsh, Gaelic, Urdu, Bengali, Hindi and Serbo-Croat (I am coming to Milorad) would welcome a homely, friendly or puzzled recognition wherever these poems would be found.

Milorad Krystanovich came to England from Croatia in 1992, writing poems in his native language, some of which were translated here in Birmingham, until he began writing in English. His poem in the 50 was back translated by himself *from English to Serbo-Croat*.

There could be no formula for making poems that would appeal to people simply because they happened to be waiting somewhere. Generations of us have been introduced to, or have chanced upon poetry in very different ways, as have people who have arrived here from elsewhere. How are poems to be welcoming while not simplistic?

What do we do when we have to wait? I suppose variously we worry, we remember, we pray, we get annoyed.

It would have made no sense for me here in this city not to have asked Roy Fisher. It was sad that Roy should have needed to be anywhere near a hospital, but this feeding-off-our-life thing is never far away, and his minute by slow minute experience delivered the goods again.

Adjudicating a competition was a cue for me to ask my chosen winners, Caroline Carver and Derrick Buttress for waiting poems. Not classifying her as a Welsh poet but as poet-editor of *Scintilla*, I asked Anne Cluysenaar. As I recall, I saw a poem by Peter Street unexpectedly and it was notably different from those of anyone else I was asking, and I asked him.

There were poems I would have liked to be printed on a small piece of paper folded and put directly into someone's hand, so quietly personal a poem can seem, even stranger to stranger. Gillian Allnutt's poem would have been such a one.

I don't remember who I may have asked who didn't respond or responded then didn't send a poem. There was no doubt I would ask Selima Hill, Ursula Fanthorpe, Carol Ann Duffy and Fleur Adcock, and they all sent poems. Andrew Motion must have got used to being asked, for the sake of his name and position, but I wouldn't have asked if it was only his name I wanted. I had seen enough of Siân Hughes' poems to know one should be in the pack; I like to think I met Anne Stevenson when she was running the Poetry Bookshop in Hay, but I think it was later, most likely when she was giving a public reading.

What happens to a poem after it has been read? Not, what happens to the reader, but how is the poem itself changed? It is more than likely that when these poems have been read wherever they've been read, that in one reader's memory the poem is reduced to one crucial line, in another to a single image, for someone else the title and one other line remain, a reader may retain a feeling that *something strange happened* to them, but no word of it has been recalled.

A poem in a public space, on a wall or notice board (or on a web site), is alone and naked. Someone may read it, pause and read it again and again, someone else may read a line and pass by. There's no arguing with this, and a poem that holds one person's attention may leave someone else cold; and this latter person may happen upon the same poem a year later and be held by it.

Nor could I know all the private experience that travelled to me as poems; nor for some poems could readers know what I knew; other readers would be aware of circumstance in ways I could not be. I began this account with Jayne and Robbie and other poems declare themselves. Pauline Stainer's poem beginning, 'Since your heart faltered', I knew was painfully real; Chris Woods' poem told playfully his life as a doctor while the last line, '*Doc. Are you all right?*' wasn't altogether a joke.

On the other hand I didn't know whether Elin ap Hywel's opening, '*Un surth yw Sharon*' ('Sharon's a sad bag') was someone she knew or a fiction. Carol Ann Duffy's 'Emily Mercer (96)' was another who might have been either.

A poem can work in one of many modes. Some of these fifty poems seem to communicate the poet's voice speaking directly. Others seem to convey an inner voice, as if overheard. There can be immediacy and there can be a considered distancing.

Why did Wendy Mulford's poem have only two commas and no full stops? It's a question a reader or two may have asked, and found themselves re-reading it in different ways, even joining up one part of it with another out of sequence. It

does read in many ways. I knew I would ask Wendy, and I knew I would ask Suzanne Batty, who had come to courses I'd worked on and had published almost nothing. She is now published by Bloodaxe. Her poem in the voice of a dog wanting, wanting, is human heart through and through.

If two or more poems are on a wall near each other and someone reads from one to the other, there might be a potent mix, for instance,

There is a thin woman in my soul [Miranda Tite]
Write a poem about the sky [Judy Tweddle]

or

But burning is something we share [Anne Stevenson]
but time and words passed me by. [John Agard]

With such a range of poems, the 50 could show awareness of craft, could show naked experience, could play with language or get to the nitty-gritty of how it is, this life-thing. A poem might struggle on or it might sing. If you say these are false distinctions you'll be right, of course, but I think if read by someone waiting or passing by, each poem would nudge differently.

John Agard participated in the first Poetry Squantum I started at the Hay Festival and I had heard him read. Anyone who has heard John in public might think, if I'm going out of my mind waiting, I don't want his poster poem, I want him here speaking it to me! This is no small matter: how can the poster poem equal presence?

It's not perverse to think a poem might meet, even provoke rejection - *How dare you! Leave me alone! Bloody poetry!* And a poem has to take this, even expect it. I question the value of the poetry of easy consolation in hard times. I'd have to stand corrected on this, but I think Mike Jenkins' poem was the only comic relief, almost a throwaway.

This is my half-way personal account, with retrospective thoughts, and I shall end it with voices who, terribly sad to say, will not be heard again out of flesh, blood and soul. Both poems, as it happens, concerned themselves with time. Amryl's - another poem without punctuation - began,

*A corner of time waits for distraction, waits for indecision
It takes that ripple of thought and twists it*

and this was the whole of Roi's,

*Time is of the essence,
hope is the fruit of patience,
compromise may be difficult
but thinking is easy,*

so why be in a hurry ?

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