

Poems and stories

These are some of my poems, sometimes written in times of personal crisis, and extremely quickly (they sort of write themselves it seems). I have found that rather than “do nothing” when there is nothing I can do, at least if I can manage to write a poem that allows me to “do something”. In the past if I allowed myself to get completely stationary it has been almost impossible to “move” again (takes years).

The poems are followed by some of my stories.

I don't pretend that I am a poet (or much of a writer either). But they are here to give some insight into who I am (my limitations and quirks) for the purposes of considering the really important part of what I have to say (well, important to me, and maybe many others) “Call it what you like”.

The first four are to do with where I now live.

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11 Adderley Street (1999)

I'm the woman at number 11
Nearly lady of number ten
It's true they had several more bedrooms
And two bathrooms already, but then
The stairs seemed a little bit wonky
The walls just a little bit bad
Although it was such a bargain
And to turn it down made me quite sad

I am comfy at number 11
Even though decor is gauche
My bits all fit in quite nicely
So it all seems quite pleasant and poshe

And what makes it nice really is people
They've come from all over the place
All colours and sizes they've come in
Come and gone, with a smile on their face.
It isn't just me who likes it here
Not just me who learns so much
Of the oh so many who've come from elsewhere
Our minds learned its OK to touch

On topics so very far reaching
On ideas exclusive to each
That at uni'city it's turned out to be they like being with me
And each other, here, and sometimes a trip to the beach

It's funny how many dip toes in
Remember they're not far from home
And when they get there they tell them of here
Just as we here from where they have come.

It seems like we're all one big family
It seems like this place is a home
It seems like we're part of each other
It seems I'm no longer alone

So I'm queen at number 11
Serve people as best that I can
I try to make a little heaven
For "my" kids whether girl or young man
And briefly my efforts acknowledged
So briefly I feel I belong
And share who we are
As we share where we live
As we take what we need
And learn how to give

New Deal

What a good idea. Thank you ever so
For dealing with me. But what doesn't show
Is that it is you, with the cards and too,
Why should it be as ever so tragically true
That deciding for me is still up to you?
All on my behalf
Excuse me if I laugh
Can you **never** see
Decisions made by you and only affecting me
Will not ever be of any use? Because my God made me free
To think and feel and breathe and die
When I was ready. And this sky
Is just as bloody much my own
As yours, who has an ansaphone
Computer copier expense account
Good luck to you. But you are not my fount
Of wisdom. You had luck.
I can see your point. Seeing mine is stuck
Deep in your vision of how things should be
Try thinking how you'd feel if you were me

Oh impossible thinks you, so wise and so mature
Well it bloody well ain't of that I'm quite sure.
With my experience, kid, of life and the world
I can assure you whether you're boy or girl
Choice for another how their world should be
Is an insult. "Let go of your grip, just trust me"
Trust you who moves on and is paid to care?
It is me who feels it, you cannot share
In the understanding of my circumstance
Unless you stand in my shoes long enough. Chance?
My chance, my deal, pass the cards let me feel
The weight and the smell of them
My mind won't reel from responsible action
That you don't approve.
Professional? Paid for it. I do it for love
You've so much to learn about destiny
Life can be messy; sure, the mess is me
Tidy away what society wastes
Pretend I'm not screaming in your face.
Pass me your hand, so what I can do

But all that I try is edited out
I stutter and stumble and blither about
Disenfranchised, despised, until I shout out
"If my God was as clever as you
He would have got everything right". Get a clue?
Yep he delegated to me my choices so few

But one of them is now to write this to you
Self appointed like every other cuckoo
To feather my nest so it does well for you
We all when we're young want to build for the best
But we learn it ain't easy...and all the rest
Some must die trying, they never give up
Some just get pushed to the side of the cup
(That doth not run over), there we get stuck
If I think New Deal understands how I feel
Then hand over the cards, let someone else deal

Oops, you are scared to in case we louse up
Our lives, our chances. Oh thanks for concern
But entrenched procedures are what you have learned
It sticks some on top but the many below
See that you're vulnerable, all it will flow
Downwards

We know who we are, us all down here
And we really aren't different; do not add to the smear
On our names, unemployable? But there aren't jobs!
Except penning sheep (us), by you load of snobs
Teaching at us. Preaching twaddle that fobs
Us not off. Call us apathetic? What?
Did I misconstrue?
Oh sorry I said something that might affect you!!

Your life? Spending power? Reputation? PHEW
Incompetent might it not be me, but you

Career choice as victim, comfy to think
Charity patronage, peg for the stink
Recycle me please before I rot
To give me a chance wouldn't take a lot

Don't pretend to be nice
Tutting all about vice
A good deal is all I need (to be precise
-Ly just as good as you)

30th January 2000 to my vicar,

David don't take this personally, it is for the whole Board

I wrote it when you left, Elizabeth

Scientifically speaking

Now this is a funny poem
If you bother to read it you'll see
A bit scientific
But not that terrific
Al lee

I was writing to one of my lodgers
Who's away so he has time to think
When with me he's so busy
So off in a tizzy (Cloth! Floor? No not more)
Cos "work" is his meat rest and drink

I support all my lodgers tremendous
Ly, wish that their Mum's had found time
To teach them more sense
At least not so intense
About everything "useless"
(Academic but dense)
Before sending them right round the world to me
So waste so very much of mine
Not just teaching them things
But in sign language too
Certain their mothers do
Do the things that they tell me
In continents vari
Ous never happen

Socks fairies et cetera live worldwide it seems
Come on kids, tell me what else "in your dreams"
You think I should do. And not disturb you. Do you think I am daft?

Anyway, I stray
From the poem today
Which is something along the lines of this
When I swim in the sea
So much supports me
Not exactly intended
To me hold suspended

But on that I rely, not to sink, (or to fly!)
Perfect
And in our blood there are proteins oh my
And all sorts of things drifting to keep by and by
Osmolality such that other things go
According to expectations so
Yet of themselves do "nothing" you know
Just like a landlady "pottering"

Kensington

An ageing place, full of ageing people
Letting go hope, but fighting despair
This place was young once, all neat with fine steeple
Neighbours upright, I know some who were there

Mistakes all came tumbling, depression came rumbling
Community fumbling, to grasp what they could.
They painted their bricks, and some other flash tricks
Some took smack for their fix. Die? Some thought they should

But, a new wave upon us, unless they do con us,
A chance to repair and regain
Are decisions all ours? Or intend Babel towers?
Please God no more mistakes in my name

How to turn around age? How to wipe clean a page?
Yet not lose what we gained for next time
The "experts" we see, from some univers'ty
And we think "Can they just see the grime?"

How much more need they know, to do better
Or slow, will unfold new mistakes upon us
Let them quietly do, all they think they want to
And are shocked that we kick up a fuss!

When they built what was here first time round life was clear
Empire's vision so sound and so strong
Fresh fields to conquer, (Or, maybe it's wrong) HA
Now to some new fool's empire belong

Are we to be vanquished, or can we be heard?
Will you honour this concept "New Deal"?
Can our voices attain some respect for our word?
(We can see the contempt that you feel)

If you saw what we are, we are better by far
Than so many who get recognition
We are scarred it is true, but from fools such as you
Do not force us to e'en worse condition

Do not sweep us away, to make space for they
Who are packaged and wrapped up so good
Because we have hearts and have rights and we say
That it looks to us their hearts are of wood

Have no problem with age, just help reduce rage
In our young who've been cheated from birth
Who can look around, from rooftops to ground
And see what you think they are worth

The two purples have jazzy tunes

So she said
"Whadda ya doin"
And I said
"Anythin' I like"
And she was speechless.
So
I said
"Have you got a problem with
that?"
And she said
"Well. Haven't you?"
And I smiled
And she had a problem with that
too
So
We went our separate ways

Written to sing to Steve Malmberg

Flip through me like a magazine

Already knowing what you think
you've seen

This gal's just too much woman
You can't know just what I mean
I can do it,
Shoulda knew it

Why,
I could even meet the queen!

**(Written in extreme irritation at
being stereotyped)**

The so and so poem

(So much wiser than I was)

I lived my life by the "If" poem
But the ending isn't true.
So I tried gain as in "Ground Hog
Day"
But that didn't work out too.
"They Kill Horses Don't They"
Was sort of a clue
That's just a film.
Those stories aren't true
So what now with all this wisdom

The alien stood alone

Not knowing from whence she had
come.

People were attracted,
Then repulsed
E'er caught between, she was
confused

Maybe she had all the answers
Maybe she had nothing worthy for
to hear
She reached out with all her being
Alone, aloof, she just wanted to be
near
Some other creature.

Not one came. Not one single
being
Felt the same.
She built a myriad of possibilities
Relating to their great necessities

But nothing, always nothing
Could respond.

She was examined on her all
pervading difference
Microscopically deconstructed.
And at last
Her difference was exposed.
At every level
She was just a very little more able
To think.

How could she conform
To what they felt was norm?
That is why so alone
She will always remain

Alien from nowhere.
Mistake produced here
IQ more than comfortable
By just a couple of integers.

For almost everyone
So irritating

When you dance

It isn't with your legs and arms, and even back
It's with your soul, which bursts up through your spirit
Then from your heart and mind
And moves you through your back to your limbs and even
To your finger tips.

And the vitality and joy dance on into the eyes of those who watch.
(And if no one is there, those you imagine see you, who might be
Yourself, decades earlier, or later
Yourself, generations earlier, or later).

It matters not at all if no longer can your body dance
Because you can remember the dancing times,
Or imagine them if at that lonely time you did not know it was
The time, the only time, your time, for dancing.

Dance comes from the response of your individual will
To the dynamics of the moment which is just a
Part of a unified creation so full of other possibilities
And it moves and responds and moves again.

When you pray
It isn't with your mouth or eyes or hands or knees bent,
Or even mind reaching, searching.
You do not will such, or such. You surrender and draw strength from that whole, of
which you are just one moment.

You may pray "Let this moment pass.
Let this moment hold.
Let this moment leap more energetically.
Let it be acknowledged. Let it be still a while."

And when you live,
Could it not be as you dance and pray?
Not for amusement, not to pass the time.
But focused on this precious moment,
As it moves, with you.

I think this may be my best poem

BLOOD TIES

I always gave freely some life's blood
(He sometimes gave all his loose change.
And the change was from some of my life's blood
I loved, treated all four the same)
And from here I can see
What has happened to me
Life's blood doesn't come free
(Knew not how it would be)

But my heart it learned to pump harder
My heart it is ever so strong
Yet "relationship" where I'm just larder
I see now was doomed not to last long
My heart was so "in it" it "gave out"
All it could possible give
And it seems to be that without doubt
With what's left I can just about live
But with age, or with love or something else
I find new resources within my self
To do more than love, give,
Hold on, let go, leave.
When blood runs out, and heart and more
Spirit takes over, some sort of hard core
That nothing will break, destroy, use up, "floor".
And so I continue "riding". No score
Can ever be made on this sort of thing
It is part of some people, me, that never gives in

Not that it doesn't hurt, sure, I feel pain
But for ever and ever I will go on the same.
Crucify me as oft as you would
My spirit continues for this is my blood,
My life's blood I did spend
And I'm out there with it, with me there's no end.
Irritating may be to those not involved
Persistent, surely. Spirit never goes "cold"
I am "victim" of powers that within me I hold.

The passion of birth times, demands of the past
Are nothing to spirit I just go with the blast
Of something that started so long before me
That carries me onward like leaf blown from tree
My blood is my blood and will always be
None can "take" what I intended, believed "I" gave free
Its thrust of creation, can't you see?
It is here inside; I'm forever "unfree".

You can hurt, desert, reject, lie, abuse

Some forces heed no threats, will not confuse.
I have life of my own, yes I have so much to do
That's constructive, creative, useful too.
Sure I have better things than to waste my time on you.
Time it has limits most of mine gone
On husband I polished until he so shone.
I wanted my kids to have shining example
Absurd, what I am, they detested to sample

Threatened? Who?
Blame?
The same
Do you think I want to waste over again
Thirty years plus! No.

Children we owe to, including me
That these children are needy
It's easy to see
Inconvenient?
Maybe, just like me

Creation demands I do all that I can
If that requires "fighting"
Then I will.
Understand?
If I must die fighting then so it must be
Because when I gave life, demands then on me
Require me so to do
I just have no choice

What point in finding that I have a voice
If all that I bled for in silent years
If all we live learn and bleed for never hears.

Children are future
Humanity asks
That to birth them and love them
Most important of tasks
Anything else we have time for to build
Will be as nought if neglect just one child
So many world wide
But these are mine,

I can feel them inside

This one and the next were probably my saddest. I had experienced sadder times, but did not write a poem. But the time of this eventually passed, and I did see my grandchildren again. There are words within this that have particular meaning. But to tell you what they are and what that meaning is will not be explained, as it is far too personal, and others could be affected.

To Matthew

(as you'd currently say)
"At the end of the day"

My love goes not away
For the love that I give
Is my reason to live.

That those I most love
Think I put me now above
The needs that they have
And that I am not brave

Is the sorrow I live with,
As well as forgive.
For they simply don't know
How to tell me to show

How they want me to be
How they then can be free
To be who they are
How to follow their star.

For my children aren't mine
I learned all that with time
They were sent me to share
Certain times with, back there

When we all were so young
And too busy for fun!
Important lives to be run
Knowing not 'twas just one.

And the times that we touch
Only fleeting are such
That then brings us the grip
To move on from it.

Our lives are a game
Where the ball is not ours
It touches us briefly
And say "Now it's yours".

Baby George is himself
You'll learn that for sure
And that he is OK
When he leaves you will cure

Any grief at his loss
When you must pass him on
To the next one who takes him and
Yet another "scores" from

That you were a part
Of the game of life

Is all that you wanted
As father (or wife).

We none of us can Matt
Cope (play) all on our own
There are times we don't know
About, times to be shown.

It takes a big heart to say
How can it be
That I've done my best
But my kids all shun me?

(Your time'll come, just wait and see)

And then watch them flounder
And know they need help
Too afraid to admit it, too ashamed
How they felt

That to reach out to me
For one last extra boost
Will not be a backward step
Will not tear them loose

From the plans that they have
From the life that they choose.

Our duty to kids will go on till we die
We don't decide that,
(I don't know quite why)

Maybe it's me, many others the same
Parents get hurt, again and again
All we want back is to know that you
know
How to hand on the ball when its time
to do so

So you don't muck it up, (you've seen
it done
When it was shoved at you by father
or Mum)
It isn't the going that tears me apart
It's you not knowing the love in my
heart.

That you should not trust me's my
reason to think
You don't know who I am, I really don't
stink
Of a life that has passed. I live now for
sure
And for my emptiness I took a cure

And the reason I'd courage to do what
I did
Was I dreamed when I walked again
upright you would forgive
The drastic action that I had to take
To prove I was someone, for my
children's sake.

And that when I was whole
You so happy would be
To say "See my Mum
She belongs to me".

Because that is the way it works,
That's how it goes
When you make something good
It's the finish that shows.

And until you know in your heart all is
done
And what you gave time to
(and love sweat and gum)
Requires you see it's used as it should
Whether its flesh and bone,
Or made of wood

And if it's your son, whom you've
known since his birth
All his strengths, all his sorrows, all his
very real worth
To be chopped up for firewood for
someone else's need
Is a pull on your soul you simply
cannot not heed

I just want to see that you're seen to
be
All that I know you are not just a tree
And for that you must know
Who you are my son, so

Know, you are my son.
Be not ashamed.
I am fine, I'm your matrix, your wood is
engrained
With so many like me, who played the
Game (not rugby)
Who handed on quality down to me

On the workshop floor,
On the pitch even more
There's a mess, which we clear up
But there's so bloody much more
The real reason we do it
Is not to make mess

We do it by instinct we do it by guess
In the depth of it all in filth of "birth"
We hand on forever
All that we're worth

If you don't trust me,
Then you can't trust yourself
Because I am quality, I am your wealth
For the love that I have, for the pain I
endure
Is for you son, my child, a bloke pure-

Ly for giving you that which you need
Support, respite, company,
Someone to grieve
With
When James breaks a leg,
And to be there for you
As your deputy, to do what you can't
do.

Because you must do work, it's the
time that to do
For handing on working is valuable too
To your son and his son, whether
foundling or true
For we're all one family
Through and through.

I pass on smiles, jokes, other
dimensions
Might be frowns smacks or even bad
reprehensions
Because if we don't teach
This language of love
Then how will they learn it,
Not by harsh words or shove

But in lots of little pats now and again
On bum or head, in bath or on train
Looking back to fond memories,
forwards to more
So this poorly leg time will pass on,
And what's more

That small things are wrong,
It is OK to say
But for so much be grateful,
At the end of the day
Which is where I came in,
So now over and out. I know Matt,
I've too much to talk about.

From Mum

Of Course the Sea is Blue

From where I stand, from where it lies. It must of course reflect the skies.
The skies are blue because they are,
It's light reflected from our star. It has to be that way.

Except for when the sun shines **pink**
But that's an anomaly do you not think?
Well, I suppose it could be true
That it doesn't necessarily have to be blue
The impressionists painted it many a hue
(But they are more arty than I, or than you).

And under the sea (the sea is so deep)
Could it hold other colours? Would that be deceit?
If below the surface which can only reflect
That which falls on it might we not detect
That our old friend the sea that protects you and me
And where life crawled from (just her part destiny)
A billion other colours might possibly glow
Given opportunities inappropriate to what you think you know?

So if rejected dog found a place in the sun,
And learns by kind voice not hide not to run,
With food in his bowl, and his fetters thrown
Might he not too, show colours his own?

If unloved and unwanted he always looked grey,
Years dreading the thoughts of another day.
Has he then no rights to show who he is
Not to whimper or simper or try ever to please?

But a dog in his own right, not captive, not slave
With a billion more chances of life, to behave.

Can you not bear to see what was there?
Hiding within him under that chair
(Trying so hard just not to be there
Just serving, deserving so much better)

And if in dismay, you must run away
Right round the world so not to see, not to say
"Sorry, I was wrong", who makes herself victim could it be you?
Who casts herself out, and paints herself **blue**

PEARL

So here comes the third birthday of my little girl
And just let me tell you why you are my pearl.

(But in another ten years we'll read a story
Not happy at all, so it's why I am wary
It is called "The Pearl" and is written by Steinbeck
Of a treasure peculiar that caused a wreck
Of the life of the finder at which we might wonder
Others were jealous, his pearl tried to plunder)

So this is between you and me little girl
As we struggled to life, same day, far away, in the world
Inside that world was so much of pain
But we've wrapped up that hurt again and again

And that very sharp grit, by the time we finished
Was a beautiful sight that even others might cherish
But it's ours who made it. Its ours to share
No-one should judge us, we are who we are
You are my Funny Face, (We'll see that film)
And I am your Libbus, you gave me that name,

Really your Libbus, yours (In a swimming pool,
makes me smile again and again)
And that I'm not a "real" Nanny is just between us
(bloomin' cheek who says so)
It's our pearl that we shelter, nothing to fuss
About. We wrapped that up.

I've so much to tell you. (Some best to wait)
Like, my Mummy was "Pearl" her second name
And Mary like Marie, and you El, like mine
Her Nanny not hers, other things near the same
A rose is a rose, and a pearl is a pearl
And you will always be my little girl

Even if you get VERY BIG, I'm bound bigger still!
The other day I showed Auntie Madeleine your secret present
And she said "Oh she has a little heart
You can't say that she hasn't"
My Mum started tiny, she had a huge heart,
Which she showed to me too
And such jewels none can part me from.
Twiglets and tree trunks, not that very different
Pearls and treasures shared together
Private smiles known to no other
I know you love me, and you know I love you
And we'll make strings of pearls of the grit that life deals
The two of us not such very matched girls

From George (16 months, top of the stairs, almost in a towel)

I'm a little concerned
(You may as well know)
That a really full frontal
I just shouldn't show
Gran said to turn round
For a proper photo
To send off to Suffolk to
Great Great Aunt Flo.
Yet,
There are certain questions
One cannot dismiss
As regards for instance
Has she seen one like this?
But at her age one wonders
Might the full impact be missed?
But,
As Gran said, "Go for it"
When my bum she kissed.
Well,
As young man to wise woman
Here recklessly goes,
All the questions one asks of
One's Great Great Aunt Flos
Is size what matters?
Might it match to my nose?
(Which relatively speaking is a fair
old size)

Gran, so, ask if you would
Does she think it might grow?

And tell me if you could,
What a man needs to know.

THANKS

Yours discretely, ponderously, and
Very cleanly (just out the bath).

PS And Aunty do you think its true
Gran takes excessive advantage
sometimes? Of men I mean.
Young ones of course, (like me),
for entirely her own purposes.

Grandsons' gifts

All of a sudden, quite out of the blue
Fate drops a couple of grandsons on
you.
They come with so little but e'en that
they share
(Stones in their pockets, nits in their
hair)
Tumbler soon mended, nits take more
time
Snot with their kisses, still they are
mine.
So what can you do but get out of your
bed
Crawl to the sofa and sleep there
instead.
Wish that they slept until ten or eleven
But I'm lucky if they haven't woked me
by seven.
The reason right now I have time to
write this
Is I'm sitting pretending I'm busy, so
miss
That one is still wriggling around and
around
And he must keep quiet as the other
one's sound
Asleep (he goes to school). The Little
one takes a nap then as a rule.
Chicken pox there are spreading about
I wonder if I'll get those too.
Ah! He's dropped off at last,
Now for some housework
Place needs sorting out

Abigail (with me)

You taught me something I cherish
And needed to know for sure
That the best I could do not to
perish
Was so simple so total a cure
As we stood at the edge of the
water
In oh such a beautiful place
My wonderful little granddaughter
With a version of my kind of face
My soul healed in one eternal
instant
As we took our place in the sun
And my place was alongside my
infant
So my shadow could shelter her
fun

Blokes Grans and Plans

“You’re opposed to read the
constructions”

Said Mr Big to young Small
“But I can’t read yet”, said Tiddler
“Neither can I much”, said Tall

“Let’s ask Nan” was the chorus,
“Getter glasses”
“Get the box, ‘snot in so many bits”
“And that big bit you trod on,
Let’s try that”
“Yep, see if that bent bit still fits”

So, constructions opposed
And some tissue for nose,
(Sees more with her glasses does
Nan)

And she helps them assemble,
(Crippled fingers atremble), and
They find with surprise that
“We can!”

For Ella (an’ lodes ov uvvas,
espesherly bruvvus)

If only kids reorganised the world
Things would be simpler by far
Common sense would prevail
And no-one could fail
To know what is what,
Where we are.

For instance
Turkeys would come from Turkey
Pandas from Panda Monium
Mustard instead of custard
Unless you didn’t like it
And then it could be mustardnot

It is all so very not obvious
And that is why I suppose
They will not let us change those
things
That should be,
Everyone knows.

Bedtime when we are having fun
Up time when we’re sleeping

Food that’s nasty “Good for you”
Nice stuff “not too much”
Or “just a few”

How can it be, who is to say
Whether I can, or whether I may
I’m not going to get it
Even if I pray
“God loves good children”
Oh where are they?

I don’t know anyone better than me
Oops now the spellings are
covered in tea.

And chocolate biscuit
The problem with that
Is “not till you’ve finished”
And I’ll never do that.

Not while there’s no sense at all to
things
And it’s not our fault
It’s not our idea that brings
The dust under beds
Or the nits in our heads
Or tools rusty in sheds.

Why so much stuff that I’m sure I
won’t need
Silly words just for spelling
No-one ever says “plead”.
If it rhymes then it ought to be just
spelt like freed
So reorganisation by kids, zwot we
need

(From someone on your side)

**What can one say to
grandchildren, if ever they ask**

There is a stillness which is peace
There is an agitation called anxiety
There is a moving which is joy
Then a quenching, impropriety

There is a nothing window to
oblivion
There is inertia of depression
There is coldness of indifference
There is need, and of appreciation

There is desperation to contribute
There is famine of the soul
There is question of
acknowledgement

There is beauty which turns old

Why so wasted all that playing
Why too late we understand
That a seed can be a tree or man

Only if it gets many chances

Many don't make it
Or don't make it whole
Not in the real world

And all we can advise is to try
And hope. Maybe you'll be lucky.
Try to take your chances

June 1990

Sometimes, and for some uncertain reason, one star shines a little brighter.
And when that happens, all of us are blessed.

At last I painted your picture Mum. I'm so sorry I was too late.

To Catherine

Who does not have to be pure or
kind (which is what your name
means)

Should I spend my life
Telling you about my life
And so waste two,
Or is it not that both of us
Have better things to do?

And yet I would that you appreciate
Those complex paths I trod
In giving life to others
As I tried to "serve my God"

That your way will be different
Was obvious from the start
That you must go your own way
Cannot offend my heart

But daughter do not run from me
There's no looking back, it's true
My only hope is that you cope
With all life holds for you

Unprepared with all my lumber
To carry on your back
Cos I off-loaded everything
It caused for me to crack
Now my future holds in store
All that there had ever been
And maybe even more.

That that should be without you
Was not what I had planned
But so be it, if so you choose
But darling, you have much to lose
Besides not standing in my shoes

Paths

There are no paths in the ocean
Yes this is so
And so is this

That many know their courses
True, that's mostly fish

We surface dwellers set by two
dimensions
Map out our thoughts
Write down intentions
Live to pretensions
Grasp for inventions

And when the oceans in between
we face
Where sea meets rock particular a
case
To fear, but even waves, endless
as they rear
Above our heads engulf all planned
directions

But if we dare roll right down our
sails
Give in, turn sideways to the gales
If vessel good 'twill not o'erturn

Just travel up and down and not
along
Or not across
And before long wind and waves
will pass

Strangely we may then find
A different course

Which might be to "be still"

Learning of love, a gift of life

First clear your mind,
And every preconception, leave behind,
Take no maps, you can't know what to find
Nor where to find it, take not e'en "perhaps"
I used to think the beauty of my child
And health and strength and intellect therein
Gave me my joy, but little funny face who was not mine
Links hearts with me and loves my smell
(Our pain she's wrapped up as a pearl)
My own I think they loved me, ne'er so well
(Like air, just there).
And more mature than this
The wonder of a first true giving kiss (not one hint of taking)
To staunch my overwhelming tears of emptiness
And once that space was made, a new life quickened.
Moved not by my beauty, all long gone
But by my pain, his loss somehow seemed the same
As mine of child. Some shared humanity in grief
Maybe beyond even our belief, it happened, souls moved near.
Take not the maps prepared by culture, of where and why and how to venture
Take nothing not one ounce of expectation, be alone with nothing, have no
destination,
(Of course none chooses devastation)
Find yourself upon forgotten path to nowhere, see a spider's web bedewed at dawn
And gently caress it with your breath, it will respond. And in so doing learn respect
As well as love, for life and guiding forces deep within.
We orchestrate our lives and all surroundings
For to serve our purposes. The soundings
Of instructions so to do, "because" wipe out the accidents so few
That could inspire oh so many who are lost within their maps
I had such plans to which my life I served, all worked out wrong,
Rethought, retried, reworked, not one small song
Of joy. No matter what "achieved". I gave up, and at that point was relieved
With nothing, going nowhere, holding only grief
And as I even that let go, another chose to touch me.
Not my plans, nor my achievements, not my intellect nor bereavements
But another who saw me, and was moved not by sympathy, exactly
But by instinct, confused strange, too complicated, or maybe far too simple, to
explain
Who seeks for spiders? Who alone would find themselves in twilight, damp
For no cognized purpose, all things gone, and at that moment, feel at last "I'm home"
I hear the words my father said, translated in this younger head
I smile inside, something is here, some response, some oh so natural meeting,
Albeit e'er so fleeting, or maybe not
Some raison d'être beyond my understanding
Relax, accept,
Let go, my pain, all shame, no need to fear, nothing left to lose, let us draw near.
Oh, so this is how it supposed to be! So we'll share this, (and many things my dear,
Not just yet, maybe, there's another year, but I don't know that now).
Oh, so this we are supposed to know, before we plan quite where to go.

Virtually

I try not any more to dream of making love
That time has passed for me; of course I knew it would.
But I do dream of holding you
And who we are, what time it is,
Varies as the dream encircles all experience.
Sometimes I hold you in my arms and I am so beautiful
And oh so beautiful you, my secret child out of wedlock,
Breastfeeding content and I caress all your perfection,
Whole foot in my hand, as you naturally take
Everything that you could need, from me.

Other times you walk me on the beach
Ageing grandfather, me on your shoulders showing me,
How accurately you can throw from time to time, and
Shells and catching fish just gently with our hands,
We ask them questions of their world,
Then let them go about their business,
Perhaps confused, and we are sorry that we so amused
Ourselves and my legs coil round your shoulders lest I fall as you
Crouch and stand and we make funny shadows on the land
Where we belong. And you laugh and
Tip me off and catch me and put me back
Upside down undignified, so certain of your strength, and my reactions.

Sometimes we are siblings trying very hard to sleep together on too small a mat,
Back to back, our mother working by the door in moonlight
Listening to us trying to be good.

Sometimes I'm old and dying and so happy in relying that you will stay 'till all is over,
gently making sure I never smell

Or maybe as you cut my nails I am my grandsons and you my different uncle whom I
so trust. But who they say he must, needs, have a different life
And must, needs, have some other wife who is not my mother.

Oh uncle I so wish that you could stay here in my bed,
I can go on the floor, or somewhere else instead
Oh come in the kitchen and cook for me, anything you like.
Or we could play, a bit longer if you stay,
With my best car, or you can chose whatever you would like,
Even my shiny new very best bike.

But be careful it is small, and you are rather tall
Make sure that you don't fall!
Or they'll send you away, and I want you to stay.

You say you will be back, but I can't wait for that!

The Tawoh Tree (for James)

Once upon a time, in a place not really that far away, was a beautiful forest. It had been there longer than the oldest stories, even since before the beginning of known time.

There were young trees, old trees, in between trees, and in between the trees every imaginable thing. Birds in the branches in blues and greens and reds, and butterflies fluttered by so colourful we cannot even tell what the colours were; they seemed all at once so iridescent. You have to see. Caterpillars on the leaves were fantastic, trying to be peacocks or lions, but rather smaller. Grumpy hedgehogs lived in the roots, because there were no hedges.

Rabbits lived in holes right under, lined with all sorts of nice soft stuff, which got stuck on the hedgehogs and made them grumpy. It isn't easy being prickly you know. Squirrels were up the trees, and when we say red, we really mean ginger, or auburn, and they were up there because the leaves were so dense, it was the only way to catch the sun. With the sun on their backs, they looked copper and pure gold.

Behind the trees were foxes. Amongst the trees were deer. And everywhere they could squeeze a place, toadstools, toads who never sat on them, (too fat), bluebells, dainty daffodils, primroses, anemones, everything you could possibly wish, (and a few things you might not). There were streams, sparkly stones, smooth rocks, squeezey mud, snapping sticks, kicking leaves, swingy branches, dangly vines.

All things grew and made their young in their own time. All things got old and died, likewise. And they were content with that. And they sank back into the soil to give back what they had borrowed for a while. And so it went on for so many generations we thought it would be forever. Everything in the forest supported everything else. Old trees leaned up against young trees, and in the shadow of the bridge was a little world of its own, with fantastical spiders, on fantasmagorical webs. These the hedgehogs avoided, even though it was as near as they could get to a hedge. That made them grumpy too. (They insisted merely prickly). We try not to think about it in case we giggle, which doesn't solve a thing.

There was harmony (at least once the early birds were exhausted from showing off and waking up everyone else). It was accepted every plant and creature in the forest was different. That suited everyone. Together they made a whole and beautiful place. And time moving on was welcome. Just enough spring, summer, autumn, winter, just enough morning, day, evening, night, to get all you wanted done, if you did a little, slowly (especially the hedgehogs, but not the squirrels). As they said, how can you jump slowly? And that is what they do, other than arranging their tales in the sun.

It was exciting, managing their affairs, coping with small changes, being born, getting old, remembering where you put things, particularly squirrels. Life went on, and death. These were the days of innocence.

And so it went on a bit longer.

There were people in the forest, called indigenous, just like everything else. Their ambitions were to live a full life, and enjoy it, and their children, and their parents, and each other, and the forest.

But eventually things changed a lot.

And this is how.

The people who did not know this forest, dared not enter in case they got lost, decided to change where a river went. It was a massive scheme to improve the lives of the people in the city two mountains away, where the sky was brown, especially at night.

Strangers came, in enormous trucks. That seemed to make things difficult. They soon made roadways for the trucks. Monster machines with arms and jaws tore out grandmother trees, and simply squashed young ones under.

The body of the forest lay in several pieces. All seemed smaller. All seemed spoiled even if you could not see the scars. From top of tree to base of root, forever-ness was gone, forever it was supposed. Maybe so.

A few of the people who came with the machines, a very few, wondered at the size of the trees, even thought they might be useful for furniture or something, but it was far too difficult to transport them, so they were burned near where they had stood. The wonder was short lived as the trees were so hard, and blunted so many saws, that there wasn't time for wondering, especially when the roadways became a sea of mud, and then a canyon. The whole project exceeded all projected and even contingency plans.

A couple of boss men brought their children to see how important they were. One child caught a butterfly, and later showed the paper weight his Grandfather had made for him with it to his own grandchildren, in the days when this kind were extinct.

Eventually the river was diverted as decided, more or less. And the works road having been concreted, it wasn't at all a bad way from getting to view the impressive achievements, by utilising the facility that modern civil engineering capabilities had created, from the city, as a quick break from the rat race, at weekends. And they enjoyed the forest en route. They dug up a few plants, shot a few deer, sometimes even killed them and took a bit home, usually a back leg, although they were always too tough to eat no matter how carefully cooked. They collected moss off the leaning trees for their hanging baskets, and carved their initials on trunks of others.

Footpaths were created as the soil stained white trainers beyond redemption.

Things changed more, as we know they do.

The undergrowth gave up. The soil hardened, then started to peel. When the rains came instead of saturating the earth its sponge, it ran over it, gathering fury. The forest cut itself into smaller pieces. Only the oldest trees could hang on. And the ground baked hard. And the rain could do no good. And eventually what was thought to be a picnic fire, (the view was better now the ground was cleared, no longer like being in a green tunnel), the remains of the forest blazed. And the inferno on the dry ground spread, even endangered the city, even burned right into the forests that had been untouched, miles away downwind.

It was all on the news, would have been more if it hadn't been election time.

Twelve years later the city was flooded by derelict people. It was decided to again find international funding for an environmental project by which it was hoped to involve such migratory (indigenous no longer) labour and rehabilitate them to some extent. It was applauded from every side, (politically so correct, morally acceptable). Charismatic leaders were in there, seen clapping.

In brief the project was to create a forest. It was obvious, so simple, hands on, alternative low tech, totally appropriate. It was arguably even sustainable, absolutely nothing to lose. The indigenous peoples, (hardly recognisable with their haircuts and T-shirts), were to be paid to plant a forest, and a better forest than there had been. The species would be useful, completely unique upgraded specification, future possibilities as yet unanalysed, hopefully highly lucrative.

Internationally the words indigenous, species and managed as well as eight others were added to the school curriculum for six year olds, with matching video. Every possible advantage of this once in a millennium learning experience was squeezed, sucked, wrung, out.

“Love a tree” T shirts came in all colours “I supported planting the forest”. 0.125% from each and every one went towards transporting compost from Siberia for the containers for the young trees. (Naturally any soil remaining in the other forest had been harvested for use in another project, easier to shift, though you might not think so, than timber. It’s all a matter of logistics and economics).

Thoroughly ambitious all together, actually planting a real forest.

The people, mainly men, were trained in husbandry and under careful guidance a two hectare nursery was established. Not easy with illiterates, after their hundreds of years learning from their fathers what to do, getting them to do it properly, according to books, required patience. Overseas students got special scholarships even for PhD’s to take part in this ecological / economical / sociological experiment.

The initial priority was the nursery. Once trees were reintroduced more than likely the forest would restock itself with insects, birds, reptiles, mammals all or most of the fauna, insofar as anyone had a clue of what there had been.

There were various seedlings and even saplings that had miraculously grown amidst the blackness. Murphy’s Law would have it that certainly the strongest, but almost all of them, were in exactly the wrong place according to all the research, and plans. Efforts were made to move them, not completely successful despite tremendous care and attention. Irritatingly some took a full four years of intensive attention to actually die, wasting valuable time and resources.

It was decided that these types should not be part of the project. They were incapable of coping with the slightest tap root challenge. They could not survive the inevitable minimum of three transfers, which was essential as part of the adequate protection dictates of the distant funding bodies.

Other species that continued to spring up in situ were accidentally left, eventually, as there were so many. Everyone was so busy at the nursery after a while. Those trees were opportunist species that had never got much chance in the established forest. But prior to that many other difficult to distinguish seedlings were simply trampled as site lines were implemented, several times over, as they seemed to disappear. Ground works were tried, to stabilise slopes, but it was rather difficult, and the students were not quite sure about being so much in the sun once they ran out of UV blocker.

It was determined that this should be a user friendly forest, a chance to design in visitors' needs: picnic areas (fire precautionary notices), toilets, wardens, first aid, one or two commercial outlet franchise agreements, melamine finished maps, diagrams, information services with token slots, the lot.

Meanwhile back at the nursery the indigenous workers taught their student supervisors their music, which was soon transposed into something better. Tricky rhythms, unusual melodic, gentle percussive undertones difficult to catch without the original instruments. Those needed the backdrop of a whispering forest to be completely appreciated. The original music was largely forgotten quite soon, by everyone.

The students taught the workers to smoke Marlboro instead of their local weed, and they soon took on a far more sophisticated persona, especially once they wore shoes and walked properly.

A few fair-skinned babies were born among the indigenous girls. One fair skinned student went home hurriedly had a beautiful dark child, and switched to politics with her new understanding of life.

It was all one switchback learning curve, almost worth paying to go for a ride on: so vital, so dynamic, breathtaking acceleration.

A few, maybe 30% of the trees did not do well in pots, and died the first year. 50% of those left did not look too good. But that didn't matter as young trees were sent in from all sorts of places, even far off schools in far off countries, whose teachers saved seeds of fruits from Sainsbury's. Tax concessions were made, advertising accreditations agreed. There were in all enough trees to reforest the whole planet ten times over.

Three years later a rainbow of leaders came to regenerate interest and have a well deserved freebie holiday. This was a good thing. Preparations were made. A new loo block built, everything given a coat of whitewash, including the tree containers, and the odd tree as marker to the route, as there was a lot of white wash left from each workers bucket. Any trees not obviously thriving were buried.

Everyone smiled at the visitation until their faces ached.

As well as the mainstream programme, from the very start there had been a few grandmothers who had kept "making suggestions". It was hard not to offend them. In the end they had to offend them. So the grandmothers continued to do just as they believed, keeping out of sight so as not to offend.

They rescued seeds and seedlings. They made their own containers from rags and clay. They scraped their own compost. They used their own very personal supplies of fertiliser to top-dress the soil, and encourage the tap roots down. Their pesticides were their eyes and fingers.

Eventually they were found out. Everyone was furious at their impertinence. These women had no concept of ecology. The trees they were growing were the old, unimproved, unwanted, un-useful kind. They had to be destroyed in case they ruined the plan, proved too dominant. Ignorance is always so irritating, but what can you do?

The grandmothers gave up, left, went to a retirement home, it was on TV. Each had her own room for the first time in her life and facilities. Staff laughed at how scared they were about flushing the loo. What could be better?

One, the youngest of the grans, who had been difficult even as a child, ran away. She went where she wanted to be. She remembered where her grandfather had taken her and shown her his favourite tree. It was one of those that were now banned. He called it the Tawoh. Neither she nor he knew the word species. He had told her it was the mother of the forest. It put its roots down into the heart of the earth, where all rivers hide in years of drought. That was why its name meant "the promise".

And in those years, when the sun dried out all the life it could, this tree could weep sticky tears to protect anything beneath it, be it her own children or those of another. None of the experts knew about this as no such drought had occurred since they had begun to make studies. There had been no such drought even within living memory of the indigenous people, and there was no written record, and for two decades now no time for the telling of outdated tales.

The grandmothers knew, but did not think of telling. They were getting used to TV now. In the early days of the invasion those others who could have told were not the ones who had any desire to hang around the newcomers and broadcast the wisdoms of their fathers.

This woman had not attempted to tell a soul. It would be pointless. Her views would be disposed of without the slightest acknowledgement. So her energies she used more constructively. She listened to her heart to heal its pain. Her grandfather had not found her awkward. He had delighted in her. He had loved this tree. It did not have the most beautiful flowers. It did not have the most beautiful shape or smell or anything other than a heart. This

was inside the trunk just where it met the ground, and the tree could swell to contain it.

She found just one knee high. And there were others, smaller, harder to recognise. She cared for them all. She got ill away from her people with no-one to talk to. They found her and forced her into the “home”. She cursed everyone. And they sent for girls to sing to her to appease her spirit, to keep her quiet! And these girls promised for fear of her wrath to keep secret her tree-lets, and care for them. They had respect anyway, as they saw their hopes for a different life with this new age found them as subservient as ever. In the old ways a woman could gain prestige through her sons. The new ways offered no chance of anything except, well, best not to say.

Almost all of the trees had diseases. They cured them. All of the other trees did not thrive. They gave them attention. The Tawoh looked not at all bad. It was in the best container so it waited last to be re-potted. By then all the scrounged containers from boyfriends and brothers were used up.

A dry year followed. Trees were watered twice a day. Their leaves had to be washed of dust so the watering was from the top, not bottom. The desperate roots turned up destined forever to be confused and vulnerable. Forever wasn't long this time. The Tawoh didn't need that. No dust seemed to settle on its even more shiny leaves. It always looked fine, so needed very little attention at all, often forgotten, even for simple watering. Its root went right through the container, right into the ground. When it was decided to move the remaining trees nearer the well (as no-one came there now), it couldn't be moved at all.

It was almost forgotten, until, a new kitchen block was to be built in its hiding place for the next stage. The surveyor did not distinguish it from any other. He managed to slice it off from its root, to show a girl how tough he was. The root was incredible: thicker by twice than he expected, and oily. It was placed near some others. It got a bit of water sometimes, by accident, but the blossom it had been making fell off. It survived, stunted, but survived, scarred, ugly, deformed. It would not grow.

Even so it had a kind of vigour. And by luck it was unrecognisable so didn't get destroyed. If you did not know how it could have looked you might have said it was doing well. A couple of girls knew it had been the Tawoh.

A young post doctoral guy came for the start in earnest of the next phase. He had specialist awareness. He knew this tree's capabilities. He rapidly realised it had a bad reputation here. He had the intelligence to realise, fast, that it was impossible to get the Pandora of misinformation back in the box.

He called it by a Latin name. He knew it would soon die. He saw its plight by the contraction of the reserve swelling.

It needed intensive care, even though it looked good. He re-potted it noting the severed taproot. He watered it at the bottom. It grew a very little. It built up a very small reserve, a camel's hump just as it changed from trunk to root. It blossomed a very little. The container ruptured.

The girls were jealous. They felt threatened and resentful. The tree continued to thrive in its ruptured pot. He went to make his reports on progress. It took a month. The girls left his tree alone, completely. The fruit it bore shrivelled and dropped.

He came back briefly, his reports were satisfactory. He said nothing, but he took his tree to a place as remote as he thought he might find, where no-one could harm her, up on a mountainside, looking down on the river before where its course was altered, across to where the wind might take her fruits in future onto now barren earth. He hoped it would not be destroyed. He hoped like his own life it would be allowed to bear fruit that would in turn bare fruit. And he left, forever. You might say why did he not take the tree to Kew Gardens? But that wasn't the point. And he had his own life where this tree did not belong. They belonged apart.

The Tawoh knew she had not much life. She put all her energies into one remaining fruit the sort on a tree of her age that should be one of hundreds. It set. It falls to the ground. At this moment it awaits germination. If it requires her to weep she may not have tears left enough to save it.

On this fruit may hang the future of a forest. Or it may be the new improved forest will manage without it. Who knows? The Tawoh knows she did her best, with help from a stranger in the end, because her own people were unaware, had been too susceptible to a different promise called Progress.

She did not know that the girls at the nursery, and the students, and the grandmothers who decided if they could not "beat them must join them", agreed between themselves she had been such a nuisance with her different requirements, and that it was a blessing that the last of the Tawoh was lost. It was even written in books for future reference "not suitable".

Even the stories of the tree that was grandmother to the forest was forgotten, wiped out.

If she had known all that was said about her she might have wept her last tears, which she needs for other purposes. If a forest grows from her seed, in time new, good stories will be told about her. Mostly she wants a forest. She does not believe that the time for forests has yet passed. If it has to be that her children are not part of the forest, then that is not as hard as there being no forest at all. Her soul, all that she is, demands her to believe in forest.

And besides forests, she herself hopes to be part of something, and all that she knows is to be part of a forest, because a forest is all that she knows.

And we both hope James that you love forests too (the Tawoh tree and I, Elizabeth means “promise” too). And that you love trees and stories. Maybe like Nan you will get to plant trees, and tell stories. Maybe like Nan you will know you have a seed of something very important, very valuable, yourself and all that made you, to hand on, to give back. And by giving all that you are, be part of the tree of life, and belong to everything, and never be alone inside. To do that you must love yourself. And that you learn by being loved, and by knowing you are loved. I send you my love here. I hope one day you read this and are sure I love you, even if we often like Nan and Dad, disagree. He is sure of my love, he admitted that was so in court, and another ten years later he admitted he definitely loved me too, and was even proud of me.

Two and a half years after I wrote this for you, you call me Nanny (you hadn't seen me for a while) you simply copied Abigail. But it doesn't matter what you call me, not at all. My Mummy called a lady Nanny who was not really hers at all, except they loved each other. And she called her mummy Madge, always, (except the day that Madge died). My Mummy had no brothers or “real” sisters, or even Mummy and Daddy, not really. All she had that was really hers was me.

But that is another story I will tell you another time, if you want to hear it. Or maybe I should put it with this one, on my website, in case by the time you want to hear I am no longer available.

The Magic Pool

(June 21st 1994, in a dream)

Once upon a time, not all that long ago, in a place far away there was a remote village where for generations things stayed the same. All resources could allow the people, was to sometimes survive. Progress had not been conceived of. There was barely any change at all. Fear was woven into everything. Culture was limited to such as breast-feeding, fastidiousness in all things, and never ever wasting food, or wood, or opportunity, and of course total obedience. Such as art, legend, inheritance, symbolism had not yet appeared, except within the context of the tales of how to make the tools of survival and hand them and knowledge on with greatest respect and tenacity to detail.

Of course there were celebrations. Food to eat was celebrated by a banquet, long interrupted by bellyache hunger. Drums broadcast regularly the birth of a child. A safe delivery of child and mother was not taken for granted. A healthy child and mother was good for everyone. Celebrate now, before the anxiety of the next pregnancy.

Deaths were quieter. Equally they were shared, grief ruptured and dispersed, heads bowed to the unknown purposes of some all-controlling God. The rains were always welcomed. The harvest of toddlers from the disease bred in puddles was a natural sacrifice to the creative powers of nature. More life than death came with rain. So celebrate. They had no idea after thousands of years, that malaria, certainly not how malaria, was the killer so often. They had no idea that a shivering feverish child should be cooled, not wrapped and held. They were a strong, fine, beautiful people.

Now in those days it was not just that the people had no space in their lives for toys. There was not even any word in their language for toys. But just as every tree has the potential to bare fruit, if conditions are favourable, so has every child born the potential for joy, at least at first. Although no one expressed that the children had a capacity for joy, the idea was somehow accepted, and one thing thoroughly understood. That was the Magic Pool.

Whenever the rains were about to come, there was a place between the village and the river, where overnight a pool would form. Sometimes it started just a grown man's stretch across, and a hand deep. But almost always within a day or so it would be a shout across, and waist deep at the centre.

You must understand that almost all of the time there was no notion that water was nice. Water was essential and difficult to come by. Other than the thundering yellow river where men lost their lives fishing, which was somewhat salty, water came in small quantities. Its eye might blink up from the depths of the well, as hand over arm non-menstruating maidens pulled it just before dawn, before the sun beat down, in leather buckets that did not graze the soft walls. And during the rains there were, briefly, slimy puddles that festered before scabbing over.

So you can imagine that this crystal pool was magic, not even thought of as water. It was some strange gift not to be questioned.

The village had many taboos. Many of them so personal it does not benefit us to mention them here. In a village like this where firewood is scarce, nights as long as days, and candles not invented, once the sun has dropped, and prayers completed, there is nothing to do but sit with your household and talk until you fell asleep. Children first, keeled over in heaps on their mats, inactive elders last.

Other than rhythmical pounding cobs with girl high mahogany mortar and pestle, there had never been any mechanical noise. The human voice carried in the dark, a lower faster melody than the cowbell song from the bats. There could be no secrets. But to laugh or weep loud enough to disturb those in the next compound was an aberration, an intrusion, bad manners.

So you will imagine just how magic was the pool when I tell you more about it.

To begin with, the adults allowed the children to seek the pool without reminding them they had better things to do. Of course we might argue this was sensible, as the children would be required to work all the harder during the rains, (having already denuded the ground at the breaking of the buds on the baobab, not knowing that premature preparation in the drying climate accelerated soil erosion). Once the Magic Pool came, even from the far side of the village, children's squeals could be heard, and no one ran to beat them for it.

Unlike most things, there seemed to be no fear whatsoever of the pool, no taboos associated with it, even though it must have been realised in all things there are dangers. It seemed to be left to the children not to drown, without warnings. In fact the only taboo at all seemed to be to talk about it, as if that might spoil the unspoken magic of it. Strangest of all, nobody ever considered using the water, even though it was perfectly sweet. Not for washing, not for cooking, not even for drinking was it ever suggested a drop should be taken. But this certainly was not a taboo, this was respect.

So what did the children do when the Magic Pool came?

Well, I suspect you can guess. Every time it was forecast, by the full flower of the moringa, a couple of boys would sit up all night to see what black angel placed it there, and if white devils tried to steal it. But it always arrived the hour they both slept, and was found fixed safely to the sand. Once discovered a stillness rippled through the village as whispers passed between children, and chores were completed amazingly efficiently, before they took leave for release from the whole day's duties, completed not long after noon.

And when they got there what happened?

Well they walked sedately to the edge, just in case it startled and took flight. Then they poked it with a toe, to see if it was wet. Then in dipped a finger, to

see if it was sweet. Then gradually they relaxed and floated old kapok tree shells in it, like dugout canoes, and walked in it, and ran in it, and splashed it over one another, and sat in it, and poured it over themselves, and lay in it, and choked, and laughed, and when they could think of nothing else to do they went to tell the others.

The following days things settled down to more serious business. They would go early, before work, while the water was still ice cold, and just look deep into the pool for the children of yesterday and tomorrow, whose faces were said to be pictured there. They tried peeling back the surface to see the secrets within. And it seemed some quenching of the thirst of the inner spirit was accomplished in the process, as each child eventually moved away of its own accord, presumably satisfied, and ready for the celebration of the rains that followed, and the planting for another year of life.

That part was of course a private affair, the thinking time, done after laughter was exhausted. The Pool was a space for different activities. What exactly was learned there was never remembered. It was a moment to move on from, not hold on to, like most growing.

Generations were born, and died, at least thrice overlapped, like roofing, for better protection from the elements and circumstance.

And there was at one time a terrible war; it was said to end all wars, both sides valiant in the name of their deity. Many men never returned. Two children were born of two such men and by some mystery both survived. They were destined to marry. With no fathers to choose for them, they chose each other. Their mothers were pleased. So cautious these two anomalies, beyond wisdom it was said.

Just weeks after they married, there was yet another war. They decided not to have children, so very strange these two, until peace was restored. They did not want to put a child through what they had suffered. "How wise, how sad for us" thought their mothers. This war lasted even longer than the first. By the time it was over they were quite old. And for two more years no child came to them. It was assumed none would.

But then it happened. After all these years of waiting they had so many ideas for their child. It would have as much value as the dozen born to other parents. Everything would be done right. When she was born, almost a moon later than predicted, three long days and two nights after the onset of labour, they called her Rabia, "she who can see for a long way", because she insisted on arriving face upwards, not Lahido, (our promise) as they had promised themselves. She was a miracle child in that she was born alive, and after a few minutes breathed, and managed to open those huge, swollen, blue-black eyes. She had long thick wavy black hair, long nails, and long limbs and such white skin. She did not look like a new-born except for that. And she stared at people, and turned her head to her mother's voice on her first day. Her mother just lay beside her, looking at her for weeks, delighted, until she could resume her work again.

Her mother never allowed her to cry. She did not cry at birth, so why ever should she? She was destined to be different; an only child of old parents. She felt different. They encouraged her to think that being different, feeling different, was a good thing. It would provide security. She did not even entertain the idea that she could not possibly be so very different. It was accepted, understood, without question.

Once weaned all toddlers took their chances with the other children, supervised when remembered, except Rabia. She stayed with her mother who took no chances; there was no possibility of another child for her. When the Magic Pool came the first year after she was weaned, she did not even know.

The following year she wanted to go, but the opportunity just didn't seem to occur. The third time her father did not want her out of sight, so her mother went with her and watched. Oh for sure she was special, just look at her. She simply did not behave as the other children; (she lacked the basic experiences). She stood at the edge, delighting in the spontaneity of the other children, hoping that if invited she could join in with them. But they were busy with themselves, as children are, oblivious to others. Thoughtfully she smiled broadly at their antics, her own toes fidgeting indiscernibly in response.

The mother saw her daughter broadly smile, and wondered at her self-possession and great wisdom, so unlike the others of her age group, shrieking and splashing for all they were worth, like monkeys. Her mother's heart warmed to the joy in her child's face, she so seldom smiled. And as Rabia smiled at them she looked away, long into the distance, where she continued to smile as she could see herself, in her mind's eye, playing, with them.

Her mother later reported to her father it was right for her to go. There was value in her going, as did the others. Of course it would not make her silly, like them. She was different, and she liked it, so let her go. "She will gain from it", she asserted, to make sure of her chance. Such a concept was too alien to speak of, so was never mentioned again. She could go. The following year she was allowed to go alone, almost.

Rabia somehow felt her mother's consciousness of her departure. Somehow felt her presence. Always overly self-aware she could not "forget herself". Again she watched and smiled, her heart beating wildly. One day her children would be there in this pool, and she might play with them. Later, when the older children quietly went alone to gaze into the depths, she took a turn to see if she would have children, for she knew her mother nearly did not.

She quietly knelt. Oh see how special, her mother's heart leapt. She just had to peek to see what Rabia might see. For a moment she saw a small face just like her mother. But then a shadow cast away all visions, found out looking, unease, spell broken. Rabia, stood, turned and obediently left. "What did you see to turn away so fast?" "Hannifen Mba" "Well, maybe next year. And will you tell me, just in case it's important?" "Of course".

But by the next year her mother was dead. Everyone now knew why she had turned so fast, what she had seen, and not told. She put it from her mind. Some feared her.

Time passed. Each year left of her childhood she went to the pool. She felt in her soul there was something there for her, she kept trying. Each year some desperate woman would follow her. The first year, just as her mind was opening, a young woman who had lost every child she had ever born cast her shadow. "What do you see?" she implored. She tried hard, saw nothing. Then she stared into the distance searching. "I can see them all playing together". She could not promise a live child, but she could say that, she must perform some healing.

The next year it was an old dying woman whose son had travelled years before the war that had killed the rest. They carried her. "He is alive, and strong, and always thinking of you, and trying hard to get back". Her reputation was established. Her childhood drifted away. She had never been alone at the Pool.

She became a woman. She married. Her father and his great expectations died. She had children of course that she so much enjoyed. She particularly did not want them to be special. They weren't. She was something of a disappointment to her husband and he let it be known. Not as devoted to him and domesticated as he would have liked.

The children grew, went to the pool unattended, had lives of their own. The girls scoffed at her reputation, hardly mentioned now. She encouraged that a little. The wives of her sons felt rather threatened by her watching ways, not right.

She felt so lonely.

One day a stranger came to the village. He came from an entirely different world. He looked different. He sounded different. He smelled different. His habits were different. Even his taboos were different. People were shocked, amused. He stayed a while. No stranger this strange had ever stayed before. He seemed to settle in. He began to influence the young boys, with plastic to scrub their mouths instead of twigs. And he showed them strange signs for strange words for strange things. They started not attending their instructions with their elders. They started knowing better than their elders. He was not wanted. Stories grew with their fear.

It was unthinkable to tell him to go. But he was no longer welcome. They had heard all he had to say, and tired of it. No good luck came from the stranger, and they did not want the bad.

The village leaders decided to consult Rabia. Let her make him go. So they met. She was afraid. She did not know what to say. They sat awkwardly. She saw the stranger watching her grandchildren. Their mothers were

furious, and took them away. The space filled with others, unsupervised mavericks. They were cruel to each other, as children are. And she realised, just like her; he was trying not to interfere.

“I hate to see them being cruel. My father was a soldier, and we were always moving. The other children did not want to play with me because they thought I was different. They were very unkind. I did not cry in case my mother knew, and stopped me going with them”.

She began to understand his strange talking; his strange clothes that were so difficult to wear, his strange eating as though he was afraid that his food might soil his hands, instead of fearing his hands might soil his food. She saw his careless washing. She saw him learn not to waste the water she brought. She saw him learn her taboos. And sometimes she saw him asleep, like their young men, oblivious even to the shouting of his name, so carefree.

She ceased to be afraid. She began to look forward to their conversations. She felt she could speak freely, finding words for thoughts, feelings, ideas, and dreams, worries of which she had never spoken. She began to see her taboos for what they were, and he saw his. But both held on to them tightly, lest in losing those, they lost who they were. She needed to know who she was. So did he. Freedom of thought, real freedom, was new to both of them. Horizons skated from under as they sat together, seeing how much they had in common, underneath the skin of taboos. She felt so disturbed, so excited. A burden was lifting from her back, and she found herself clinging to it, which lifted her up almost straight, and younger than she had ever been.

He needed to know who he was, what he should do on this, it seemed, his quest for manhood. He told her of his world, far beyond her comprehension. Eventually she felt ready to break her own taboo, and asked him why he had come. He thought he had come to help people. “So is that why you get the boys to plant those strange trees?” Questions. So many questions. She did not know that she had a lifetime of questions.

“Of course”. His NGO reforestation objective was meaningless. Children collected firewood, girls fetched water, men caught fish, women gathered and pounded, boys hunted squirrels, and chased monkeys. That was how it was. She said nothing, him so full of his irrelevant importance, as the young are, searching for somewhere to put it. He said he had to go back and report what further could be done. He wanted her advice on that. She dreaded the idea of being reported in far off places where no one she knew could represent her. So she asked could she please be left out of it. Then he tried to explain it wasn't like that, that it was for the villagers to decide what should be done, did she know what were their hopes?

Their hopes were that he would go, but she didn't say that.

He pursued his explanation. It seemed someone somewhere had been allocated responsibility for this area, and he showed her a map to explain. She was horrified. She had seen a photograph once, a man so small, and

could not move or speak. But a map! All that she knew was represented as a speck on a sheet that could blow into the fire. Put it away. She felt sick.

Significant? Significance? She wanted this to pass from her. But her duty was to come to terms with this, for her village. They needed her to do this. What power did he have? What power might fall on her village and children from where he came? Oh if only he had not come to disturb them.

She tried. After a sleepless night again she tried. "Could the rains be more plentiful, or last longer, but not too long?" (What else could they need?). No, but education was a priority he was sure, along with primary health care. They needed so much help to survive. Surely that was in the hands of God? She became so very confused. She knew he meant no harm. She knew he did not think he was dangerous, could not understand, like her, he was feared. She knew he had a clean heart, and she pitied him for his enormous strangeness and all his power that he knew not how to use. She found she wanted to protect him from the truth.

He persisted. They should not lose this opportunity. It was a tight programme with no flexibility to roll over budget surpluses. She was afraid for him. He would fail his entry into manhood. She was afraid for herself, for all of them, at this distant power and its expectations. Panic. She trembled. "I have no thoughts to give you on these things". She was not wise at all. This was her moment her father had foreseen, that was vital to them all and she had nothing to say. She could speak no more. Her trust in herself drained away completely.

He saw her agony, and stopped. He released her from all his urgent remonstrations, and realised that the meeting of their worlds, through their relationship, was allowing his technology to tear through her spirit. He wanted to undo their conversation, withdraw his words, remove himself and his hard-edged hungry futility from her home. He saw it was better if he had never come: better to do none of the things that he thought so obvious before he knew better. He had the sleepless nights now. He wanted to be forgotten. He had harmed her, he saw that.

He tried again to meet her, to help her. She remained very shaken. "I see you have much sorrow" "All women carry the burden of sorrow" she replied as was the custom. He realised their survival required the utmost effort and discipline. He felt so gauche, so selfish. Sentiment had no space here. He could see that. If there was something to do, you did it without question, as though your life depended on it: because it did. Otherwise, between times, in the wilting heat of the day, or the numbing cold of the night, you waited.

He talked to her again about her sadness, her own personal sadness that seemed greater than that of the other women. She was surprised. She had begun to think as did the others, especially her husband and children, that it was her choice, or her nature to be miserable.

“I think my parents would not be proud of me. I am useless. They thought I would benefit my village. It was for that that they had me”. He knew the feeling. His parents were disappointed that he didn’t get a first class degree. He’d taken rural management, not law, as they hoped. That was why this project was so important to him. He protested what he knew. Being careful as he realised sometimes pride was all these people had left to hang on to.

Surely she was not there just to please her parents or the village. They had their lives; something of hers must be just for her. She could not see it that way. She had to be special. He understood being polite wasn’t polite. He had made her face something that could destroy her. He felt it, even if she did not know it yet.

He tried to pull something together to give her. She saw his desperation. She thought seeing her as an impostor with whom he had wasted his time agitated him. “All these years I have prepared myself for the time to help my village. Now is the time. I have nothing to say. I have no right to be with the speaking people. I am not a baby, so my place is with the dead. My life is a lie.”

Her sadness broke into tears that could not be shared. She was mourning her own useless life. He did not know anyone could weep so, and so silently, especially not these proud, obedient people. He knew he had to stay with her as she released her sorrow. She forgot who she was, where she was and even why she was. At first he felt awkward, ashamed. Then he knew it was all right. His soul moved towards hers and joined with all the souls who cry out in loneliness and despair. He felt humanity as one creature, lost, and she and he were part of that. Then he felt love for humanity. He knew why his parents wanted so much not from him, but for him. He felt free to love himself, and them, and her who had brought him to this wisdom so young.

The weeping drained away. They made light of it. The time passed for it.

Weeks passed. He still came to speak to her, more, even though she could not help him. Now she trusted him. Having exposed herself, he told her more about his world, his parents, and his doubts. His priorities were changing. His hopes were changing. He no longer needed to make his parents proud. She pointed out that their arms outstretched to him might be useful to grasp.

She could see how hard it was for these people, with so much power and so many choices, and no wiser than her own, to know what best to do. That an unmarried boy could drive a plane as easily as a donkey cart, surprised her far less than that so many chose to climb into that screaming bird, that did not, after all, foretell the ending of the world.

Still they talked. He was going. The village relaxed. There was no plot.

She seemed to regain some self-esteem. He seemed to believe she was a bit magic, as she had been thought of as a girl, she knew his thoughts. How? “You are so much like me when I was your age”. She had never known anyone so much like her before, never known anyone so much. They

laughed. Two generations, two colours, two sizes, two shapes, two genders, two cultures, two religions as different as a storm cloud from a moonbeam. He agreed when he drew breath, they were so alike. They nearly split with laughter, trying hard not to be heard, not for decorum, but lest required to explain. They laughed until they cried, and their tears as they wiped them off with their hands touched, and mixed, and many things that had been so important were diluted, and could drain away.

For all her return of confidence she could not advise him. Time ran out. The rains were due and he must leave while it was still possible to travel. She still had her inner sadness, but it was in remission. He needed to know he was leaving her in good spirits, and sometimes made reference to their earlier conversation. She did not want to bother with it, but he was persistent. So she thought.

She decided that her problem was she had never found her destiny. So he decided he would look for it for her. He looked under cooking pots, in her sleeping house, in her store box, even in her washing pile. His invasion went too far. She was angry at his young male impertinent intrusiveness. Furious when he would not stop, but laughing as she tried to beat him. She fought with him as if with the siblings she had never had. For some minutes they struggled in their play, her losing.

She astonished herself. Forty years fell away in a moment in her desperation to control him. "I never found my destiny because they never gave me time. The place to find it is the Magic Pool." She told him all about it. "Then we must look there". "But I am too old". Her agitation and excitement collapsed. He could not leave it like that.

"Am I too old to look?" She gazed at his young face, and said, "Nearly". She took him to where it might be. It was just forming. She kept well back.

It really did seem magic. The moon was bright, the night creatures hardly awake. People were still eating. He crept forwards and stared deep into the pool. There was no breeze. All he could see was reflections. He let go his breath, and it animated his reflected face. He thought how foolish to come here, to do something, and find himself trying to believe in magic. But wasn't that magic? He let out another breath. Again his reflection moved. He drew back. He remembered going through all her personal things. They had no mirrors.

"Come Rabia, and see your destiny" "Is it there" "Of course, it has waited for you" "Can you see it? I do not think I will be able". He reached back, and took her arm, and drew her forward. He knelt behind her, holding her shoulders, then pointed. "Look" "I can see nothing at all" she said in dismay. So he pointed to his own reflection. "Can you see me there?" She could. "Then who is this with me".

It was more difficult to see herself. He held her chin in his hand. And he watched her seeing herself for the very first time.

“Oh I am so old and ugly!”

He was shocked. He was used to seeing her. He did not expect her to be so un-accepting. “Rabia, am I ugly?” “Oh no, not now I am used to your strange looks. You are young and beautiful” “So then, when I am old, will I cease to be beautiful?” She could not answer at first for the sorrow of knowing not every child who grows reaches age. “You will always be beautiful” “And are we not alike?” (Which was quite, extraordinarily, funny if you saw them).

So she took another look. They looked together, knowing her sole destiny as with all of us, was to see herself just as she is, and have the courage not to turn away. And their destiny also was to see that, side by side, two worlds, two strangers, one humanity needing to be accepted to be free.

Feeling his respect gave her the courage to do now what she had never done in youth. Soon he left to return to his life. She stayed and continued with hers. The world continued to turn, without hesitation or acknowledgement, as it must. But there was a difference, in both of them.

He never returned. Once he sent a message to say, “Tell the boys to cut down the eucalyptus we planted. They will lower the water table, and take away the Magic Pool”. But the boys were busy. The elders would not instruct them. Who needs a magic pool when progress was anticipated? Anyway the boys cleaned their teeth with neither plastic, nor sticks, and were beyond instruction.

For your naming ceremony

Now that your father has given you your name in the traditional way, and passed you, named, to your mother, I will give you the greetings and blessings of all your grandparents, whose lives brought life to you. Most of us died before either Africa or even tradition were given their names.

I do it for us all as now I am the only one here. **Salieu**, let me welcome you to Fell Street, Liverpool, England, Europe and the whole world. You don't know it yet, but you are already a man of the world, made in America, born in England, entirely of African blood. First born to the son of very poor motherless child from a rural village, who now has an English PhD. May you "go as far" as your father, but in your own way, yet like him hold on to where you came from. May you like him be able to make sacrifices of personal comfort in order to achieve that which you know to be good.

I hope that you and I have enough time together that you learn to trust in my love, as does your father, who brought to me his young and pregnant wife, and as did his father, who gave me his best child. Through receiving love may you always trust in yourself. So may you always have the courage to be just who you are, never limited by fear or ignorance, prejudice, or tradition either from within yourself, or placed on you by others, (unless you freely so choose). Yet may you retain those deep values, one of which is carefulness, that have worked for so many generations world-wide, and helped us in our struggles to survive. God's future for mankind and all his creation will be in yours and your "classmates" hands. Love all of it as I love you. That is as a grand-mother, which is a very tolerant kind of love, even if you turn out to be not quite so perfect as you seem to be now.

Respect your parents, who will do their best, as they see it at the time. You will be more important to them than their own lives. What more can they give you? They have yet to face the heartache you will bring, not least in that the more you are capable, the more you will spend your life serving the needs of others. Also that very often a rich child is even more disadvantaged than a poor child. And probably most, they will in time find that they have to be prepared to give you freely away. Keep the God-given instinct you have now, to remain aware of your own needs and so protect yourself from exploitation. Your mother overcame fear, faced danger, and accepted pain, to give birth to you, our future. Men cannot really understand what women do, we knowingly risk our lives. Some foolish men needlessly risk their lives just for the thrill it gives them. Never be one of those Salieu. Respect the value of life, and what it has cost to give it. Be prepared to give your best, your life, not for the thrill, but for the future. The satisfaction is intense, I promise, and it lasts.

The world welcomes you Salieu and we who love you make a little space for your needs. In time you will need to make your own space. Take your chances here, with joy and humility, seeking truth, never with selfishness or greed or closing your mind to the patterns all around us that God uses to continue to create, some of which has to be painful. Ask not for miracles Salieu, seek to see, maybe through science, the billions of miracles already happening all around us at every single moment, and give thanks as we all do for moments such as this (the joy of you and celebration together today that you have come to us). We all salute you. And finally na sassa borro, we, your countless grandparents, wish you good luck.

X Nah-nah