Space in the City: **Write to the End – Poems from the Third Age**

When I was sixty four, which was quite some time ago now, I started going to a writing group. That was where I met Doreen who was already a member. So for many years I have written something: a story, a poem, a bit of memoir, a snippet about of my life as Warden of the Friends Meeting House, each fortnight in term time. I recommend this as an enjoyable and interesting exercise. The group is useful in that it primes the pump, gets me going, and I am firmly of the opinion that any form of creativity has a positive effect, particularly in our Third Age.

My daughter Julia, who was a proper writer and poet, worked as a fellow in Health and Literature in the English department in the university of Newcastle. She explored how creative writing, particularly poetry, could be used in a health context and for wellbeing. She worked with doctors and patients, and ran workshops for the growing number of people who were interested in the healing powers of poetry. She believed that writing and reading poetry was good for you.
But why is it so important? Poetry uses images that help us see things in a fresh way. She wrote a great deal about the breast cancer that she suffered from for about ten years until her death three years ago. She wrote about the surreal atmosphere of some hospitals, her treatment, her feelings about dying, but it was not in a tragic sad way. She tried to make a new vocabulary for pain, explored an imagery that helped her and others to deal with the difficult present.

For me, too, writing is a therapy as well as a pleasure, and poems are like cakes, you create them so that you can share them with other people. Doreen and I are going to read to you some that we have written that particularly relate to the third age, our families and our memories of the past. We have no illusions that these are great works or have any particular literary merit but they are our way of expressing our truth. So I'll hand you to Doreen...

DOREEN

You may well ask where, in our rather mundane lives, do we find the inspiration for poetry. The answer is just that – in our ordinary lives. Poetry is one way we cope with life, it helps us to see things from a different angle.
The family has occupied most of our lives. We remember them as children, see them mirrored in our grandchildren, and realise that as adults they still need our care and love. We also see other families in the light of our own. Our jobs (Vicky was a nurse, I was a teacher) meant that we were interested in all families. People are always fascinating and we are dedicated people watchers.
As we get older we think more about age and its drawbacks, how our horizons narrow and our needs alter. We try to remain up to date but often struggle with technology.
We hope that these poems will echo parts of your lives as well as ours.

This first poem harks all the way back to my own childhood. I was brought up in a very small, remote village during the war, and our lives appeared to be centred round food. This is a country child's calendar:

A Country Child's Calendar

Frost and snow in January
Crisp white celery for tea.

February – all time low
Brussels sprouts still on the go.

March winds blow with rain and storm
Suet puddings keep us warm.

April, Easter, daffodils
Chocolate eggs with Smarties filled.

May, full leaf on hawthorn hedge
Rhubarb sets our teeth on edge.

June our pantry shelves will cram
Blackcurrant, gooseberry, raspberry jam.

In the sun of warm July
Runner beans and cherry pie.

August when the corn is reaped
Roasted rabbit for a treat.

September nights are drawing in
We pick sloes to make sloe gin.

October leaves begin to fall
Russet apples please us all.

November's frost nips hands and feet
Parsnips now are fit to eat.

December brings a Christmas glow
Tangerines in stocking toe.

My own children were born in Africa, and we were fortunate - we only had to turn on a tap and water came out. But we saw many households where children had to be bathed in a couple of inches of water and their mothers had to walk several miles to get that water. And so this is called "Bathing a small girl in Africa".

Bathing a small girl, Africa 2002

Stand still, small girl, try not to spill the water
although the basin wobbles
and your feet are barely covered.
I'll scoop it in my hands
trickle it over your sturdy limbs
to wash away the dust of everyday.
We must catch each precious drop,
there is no more, the can is almost empty.

Stand still, small girl, try not to spill the water.
One day, too soon, you'll learn
to balance a full can on your head,
at first a small one, then as big as mine,
back straight, head high so not a drop is spilt.
Your feet will splay and crack and harden
as every day you trudge to fill your can,
the borehole seeming further in the heat.

Stand still, small girl, try not to spill the water.
When you grow up marry a rich man,
a man with a house in town,
a house where water gushes from a tap
and you can have a basin full
whenever you please, without labour.
Then you will know that you are rich.

© 2008 Vicky Darling and *Doreen* Pearce

VICKY

I remember thinking when I was a young parent, that once the children were older and could look after themselves, I would not worry about them so. How wrong I was. It gets worse as they get older. So this first poem is about just that. It's very short – all my poems are short, you will be glad to hear.

Motherlove

How cruel the Gods
to make us love out children so.
It does not end when childhood ends,
the fear of loss, the phone call
in the night, their children's sudden ailments,
heart stopping terror, makes guts turn to water.
Their fractured marriages, their griefs
and sadnesses are ours, a hundredfold.

The old cat sits and sleeps her life away.
She cares nothing for that long lost
troublesome litter of kittens.

I once saw a play called "Dear Octopus" in which it likened the family to an octopus with all its tentacles from which you can never escape, but you know you would not have it any other way. This poem is about just that and also about the difficulty in expressing affection to our grown up children without being irritating.

Dear Octopus

Cots, toys, marmite sandwiches,
tonsillitis, mumps and measles,
a row of shoes put ready
for the morning,
Cash's name tapes for the start of term,
folding clothes in neat piles,
enfolding, holding, keeping close,
protecting them from harm.

All grown and scattered now,
paying bills and mortgages,
running marathons, writing music, poetry,
finding oil wells, nursing dying people,
teaching, solving problems,
making life run smoothly.

And there's another generation,
fresh genes mixed in with ours,
which give new energies and gifts.
Not a day passes without
my thinking of them all with love,
I hope and pray for them,
give thanks for them. They are my life.
It is difficult to tell them so.

DOREEN

These three poems are all about various aspects of my family:

Your Voice

When I heard your voice,
a newborn wail,
sound without words,
I knew I must defend you
from the world.

When I heard your voice,
playground shrill
but with a trembling undernote,
I knew you needed me to tend
your battered knees.

When I heard your voice,
jumping from squeak to growl,
boy still in a man's body,
I knew I must give you freedom
to try your wings.

When I heard your voice
deep, manly, full of love,
making your marriage vows
I knew your journey was complete
you had become a full-grown man.

When I heard your voice
on the phone, distressed and puzzled,
asking 'Where did I go wrong?'
I knew that motherhood
goes on forever.

This next poem I wrote when my husband was ill for a very long time, and I felt the isolation and the lack of companionship which illness can bring.

To a husband with chronic illness

I watch your little boat battle against the wind,
the towering waves, the stinging spray.
I call directions from the land
but my voice is blown away
or you are deafened by the sea dragons.
Either way you don't respond.
Sometimes, on rare calm days
you sail close to the shore,
smile and wave your cap in greeting.
Occasionally we even picnic on the beach.
But a puff of cloud or a sudden squall
reminds us that good weather is unreliable.

© 2008 Vicky Darling and *Doreen* Pearce

And then, this one I also wrote for my husband, who is a jam addict, and every summer I have to turn out jars and jars of jam!

Jam

Each year I catch the summer for you
and preserve it in crystal jars.
They stand in lines along the shelf
in clear stained-glass-window colours
of crab apple, strawberry and plum.
Then when the winter comes
cold, grey, and wet
and all the world seems half alive,
you can eat spoonsful of summer
and be revitalised
by the still, languid heat of August,
the bee-song murmurs from the flowers,
the scent of pinks and lavender
and the thick, rich, dripping juice
of crab apple, strawberry and plum.

VICKY

Of course children can be challenging, our own, or other people's. The next two are about different ways of dealing with them:

Ways of Talking to Children

You can resort to baby talk,
speak carefully and clearly,
or shout at them and hurl abuse
although you love them dearly.
You can fill them up with sticky sweets
buy plastic, tacky toys,
Barbie dolls and Tiny Tears
machine guns for the boys.

"In my day", say the uncles,
"we had no toys at all,
just a saucepan lid, a wooden spoon
a turnip for a ball.
We had no sweets, no crisps or pop,
for a treat we had a bun.
We rubbed two sticks together,
that was all we had for fun."

There are those who're scared of children,
if you touch them will they bite?
What happens if you drop them,
will they try to pick a fight?
And some choose to ignore them,
hope they'll simply go away.
If they're amply fed and watered
just send them out to play.

You can wait upon them hand and foot,
speak only words of love,
endure their rudeness with a smile,
be gentle as a dove.
You can talk to them like adults,
get them to air their views,
discuss the Labour party,
and the topics on the news.

A parent's place is in the wrong
best not to say a word,
smile and give them what they need,
be seen but never heard.

Several Types of Grandmother

There's the apple cheeked variety,
shawled and lavendered,
knitting by the fire, a saintly creature
who mostly only lives in one's imagination.

There are skinny, trendy ones of indeterminate age,
who gallivant about and drive fast cars,
growing old disgracefully.

Then intellectuals with theories on child management,
who often walk away when things get tough.
They are keen to give advice, pontificate
on baring breasts in public, say bottles would be better.
It does not go down well.

Frequently one comes across the daft and dotty sort,
who burn the toast and leave the iron on.
They lose their spectacles, their handbags,
and their keys. They never learn to work computers,
how to time the video, but are often greatly loved.

Some grandmothers corrupt with bags
of highly coloured sweets which rot
the soft and tender teeth and salty spicy crisps.
They buy the children Barbie dolls and guns
instead of Peter rabbit books.

The most important attribute's an ample lap,
a voice to read a story for the umpteenth time,
a ready hand to stick on plaster,
or rub shivering children dry on beaches,
push swings in parks on rainy days, make apple pies
and birthday cakes, sew buttons on and find things that are lost.

No need for all this every day, you merely do your stint,
then go back home, for quiet nights and peaceful afternoons.

© 2008 Vicky Darling and *Doreen* Pearce

When we came back to England, we lived in the same house for thirty years, and then as we got old we had to move, so the next two poems are about moving house:

Moving

The board is up,
the advert in the local press.
Our house is pristine,
newspapers banished,
books stand to attention on their shelves,
windows and kitchen surfaces gleam,
ready for prospective buyers.

We sit quietly, hands idle,
our occupations tidied away,
listening to the noises of a silent home.

The settee cushions hold the cultured tones of *Jackanory.*
The dining table sways to *Dancing Queen.*
Laughter resounds around the cluttered kitchen
as lively boys play catch (or drop) with eggs.
The din of heavy metal shakes the hallway,
its visceral rhythm emphasised by thumps
of boys tobogganing down the staircase,
cocooned in sleeping bags to cushion bumps.

The attic bedrooms throb with teenage heartbreak,
whispers and sobs too soft to reach the stairs.
Our own hearts listen to the medley,
Silently give thanks for family years.

When we moved, we suddenly discovered a new pleasure. We had never lived in a house where there were street lights, so at night it was always very, very dark, and since we lived in a Victorian, rather inconvenient house, falling down stairs and things like that were the norm.
And then we moved to this glorious bungalow, with street lamps front and back, and so I called this poem “Darkness Put to Flight”:

Darkness Put to Flight

There is no darkness any more,
no treacherous falling stairs, no opaque doors
opening like caverns full of who knows what.
Even at midnight the street lamps spread
a gentle light through all the rooms
glowing like quiet contentment.
Yes, there are shadows,
wherever there is light there must be shadows.
Birch branches dance across the floor
and buddleia signs its hieroglyphs
across the bedroom wall.
In the small hours of the night
as I prowl restless room from room,
melancholy like an acrid fog
attempts to creep through cracks

or sidle underneath the door.
Then friendly shapes of well-known furniture
reiterate my mantra
There is no darkness any more.

VICKY

I cope with technology in a hit and miss kind of way, but I often find that my emails go astray and never get there. I do wonder what becomes of those lost emails. The next one is called:

A Very Sad Poem

Like flocks of wild migrating birds,
great drifts of undelivered emails
clutter the cold wastes of cyber space
trying to find their journey's end.

Fanned, fuelled by fires of rage from
disappointed lovers, business men
and aunts who wait for thank you letters,
they may cause global warming.

Gale force winds spring up to move them on,
while fluttering aimlessly in limbo.
Tears of frustration overcome flood barriers
breached by the weight of lost attachments.

Have pity on these poor demented things,
doomed by their need of just a dot, a dash,
a space, a forward slash, a capital. No hope
for them to ever reach their final home.

DOREEN

I wrote this poem when I first learned how to send emails, which are very useful but have their drawbacks.

Love Letters

I am sending this letter by 'snail mail'
Regardless of how long it takes
There are relays of snails across country
Rushing *ventre a terre* in their haste.

I know that it's quicker by E mail
Fast replies are part of its art
But a fax or a computer print-out
Can't be carried, warm, next to my heart.

I'd miss all the anticipation
Before the post plops on the mat
The leisurely reading at breakfast
E mail would rob me of that.

I don't want love filtered by modem
I don't want love spread on a screen,
I want to receive it on paper
Pressed warm where your hand has been.

 © 2008 Vicky Darling and *Doreen* Pearce

VICKY

I lose things all the time, but I think it is sometimes almost worth the frantic searching, because of the joy of eventually finding the lost object which is where you always thought it was, only you had not looked properly.

Losing It

I lose them all the time, elusive, precious
bits of paper, spectacles, car keys, my purse.
I'm also losing words. They float off when
I need them, though I try to keep them safe
inside my head, write lists and notes, go through
the alphabet to try to catch them unawares.

When I've time to spare, I look for what
I've carefully put in places to be safe,
but now forgotten where. I long to see
the plumpness of my purse, the cheerful glint
of spectacles, the shininess of keys,
that cheque.

I hunt, and there's no chance to sort and tidy up,
with all this busyness of looking for the lost.
But oh, the joy when once again that longed for
object suddenly appears, there, where I knew
it would be, where it always is.

DOREEN

Like Vicky, I lose things, but some of the things I lose most are words. You just go to say it, and it's not there.

Lost for Words

Words fall down cracks in my mind,
disappear in the dust and debris underneath.
Not lost forever like virginity
but lost when you want them
like car keys hidden under a cushion
which turn up later
after you've stopped looking.

Ameliorate or *incunabula*
could lie in dark corners for months
I wouldn't even miss them.
But they are too large
to slip into cracks.
Simple everyday words like
Tulip, pudding, sympathy
slide down with ease
but take days to recover.

What shall I do when
all the small words have disappeared?
I shall be left with large unwieldy prose,
sledgehammers to crack hazel nuts.

I realise now how, as we get older, our horizons pull in, our lives narrow, and there are many things that we used to do that we can no longer do. This poem is called "The Eighties" which, if I may remind you, is twice the Roaring Forties:

The Eighties
(Twice the Roaring Forties)

Our boat slides slowly past green banks,
small waves lap-lapping at the prow.
The sails are rounded out with wind,
just strong enough for movement,
so quiet the kingfisher ignores us.

No longer do we race before the wind,
leaning far out to trim the boat,
shout in exhilaration as we fight the waves,
compete with others in the Fastnet race
or dash to France to buy the Christmas wine.

If we are frank we know
our hull is unsafe in a rising sea,
a stiff wind would shred the tattered sails
and bring the mainmast crashing down.
Even the rudder is uncertain.

Instead we sail well-used backwaters,
wave to others cruising the canal,
have lunch in pubs, furl sails when weather threatens,
put down the anchor for a peaceful night,
to dream of wrestling with the lusty sea.

VICKY

This poem is addressed to my knees as I feel increasingly that they need a good talking to.

A Letter to my Knees

I am disappointed in you two. You've let me down,
after all I've done for you. I've taken you to clinics
for important sportsmen's knees, massaged you
with rare expensive oils. A specialist has been consulted,
but still you play me up and do not perform your duties
as you should. There was the copper bracelet to propitiate
the god of needy joints, and potions have been swallowed,
all to no avail. I need you both for kneeling. How can I weed and plant
without cooperation? I want to know what's going on
beneath your pale and lumpy skin, what muddles you've got into
with your ligaments and bones. If you don't hurry up and sort it out
there will be some drastic action. I much regret to tell you
that replacements will be made with some new and better knees

You may have seen the film The History Boys. The old schoolmaster with his group of keen young students keeps urging them to 'pass it on, pass it on', and this poem is about passing on tips for life at a more mundane level.

 © 2008 Vicky Darling and *Doreen* Pearce

Pass It On

My friend's auntie Joan says "Do it now"
As she speaks she points a firm accusing finger
and jabs it in the air. I have found this works,
especially for writing thank you letters
and planting out the wallflowers.

Julia always said that too much butter
is never quite enough and this is true.
So lash out on the luxury and pass it on.

My Josie says, if you're in any doubt,
its best to have a bath. You lie and wallow,
your troubles soak away, then go
bubbling down the plughole.

My friend Barbara says, just wash you face
when things get rough, put on a bit of lippy
and problems disappear.
Keep calm and carry on,
that's what the posters said in wartime.
So pass it on, pass it on.

I often fantasise about my funeral, not in a maudlin or depressing way, just wondering who is going to organise the whole thing, as that sort of enterprise is usually my job, and I just wonder how they will cope. This one is called

Last Orders

Today, with half an hour to spare
I'll plan my funeral.

I will leave instructions in the box
that holds my birth certificate
signed by long dead parents
so many years ago, my passport
with its grimly staring likeness
and the cat's inoculation papers.

I have spent my life dashing about
with smoothing irons, plumping pillows,
and sprinkling parsley tastefully.
I do not want a rushed affair with
queues of waiting hearses at the crem,
so please, a double slot, hang the expense.

I recommend environmental coffins
a flat pack I believe, but easily assembled.
Cover it with my old patchwork quilt,
a few blooms from the garden.

Afterwards, a slap up lunch for everyone,
and get the caterers in. I do not know
how you will cope without me there
to organise, and do the clearing up.
It is a worry.

I often forget, when problems about the elderly crop up, that I am one of them, and I have written several poems on this theme. The next is called:

Do They Mean Me?

A lot of them about, they say,
won't something make them go away?
I am a left wing Guardian reader,
I'm glad to say I still don't need a
walking stick or Zimmer frame.
I lose things, Doctor Whatshis name,
has given me some useful pills
for creaking joints and minor ills.

Forgetful, yes, but still not gaga,
my holidays, not planned by Saga.
I go on cycle rides instead,
and stay in comfortable bed
and breakfasts on the Pennine Way
So when the politicians say
there's problems with the elderly,
I 'm positive they don't mean me.

I don't dip biscuits in my tea,
I don't let conmen in to see
my meters, so that they rob me
of fivers from a biscuit tin.
I pluck out whiskers from my chin
with painful regularity.
And so I'm sure they don't mean me
with their 'far too many elderly'.

And another which is called **'The Rebel'**:

I have not yet grown used to being old,
(these creaking joints are just a passing phase)
I go out coatless in the winter cold,
I won't conform, and spend my final days
in idle games of Scrabble, whist or bridge,
join clubs in village halls and help with teas,
keep instant ready meals stacked in the fridge,
complain when I mislay my specs and keys.

At heart, I'm still about eighteen or so,
unsure, embarrassed and a prey to fears
that I have got it wrong, and though I grow
outwardly confident with passing years,
it often feels that I don't know the rules.
Real adults seem to be a race apart,
people such as me, they think are fools
that need a good firm hand right from the start.

I still revert to child mode in a flash,
(I always was the naughty one at school)
they suss me out, and sometimes tend to lash
with their sharp tongues. I try to keep my cool,

 © 2008 Vicky Darling and *Doreen* Pearce

say that I will try harder to improve,
but secretly I know I'll stay the same,
keep going in this not too serious groove.
Freud could explain it; I am not to blame.