



The Royal Exchange Theatre

POETRY ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Oliver James Lomax

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THE ROYAL EXCHANGE THEATRE POETRY ANTHOLOGY

The poets in this anthology are all members of Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre's Elders Company and are sharing their poems with you in the hope that they will inspire you to write and create your own poetry. As you will read, almost all of the participants had never written any poetry before joining workshops with poet Oliver Lomax in January 2020 and all of the work included was created over a two day period. Many of the Elders have continued to write and have reported back that it has been a useful way to express their thoughts and feelings, particularly during this difficult time of self-isolation. As a result, they are passionate about offering this experience to other people of a similar age group and want to share their experience of beginning to write for the first time with you as well as some writing tips that they think might be helpful for you to begin your own poems.

In the following pages each new poet shares their poem, a little bit about themselves and some handy writing tasks and tips that they have designed especially to help you begin your poem. In addition, there is a section written by Andy Barry, Elders Programme Manager at the Royal Exchange Theatre

in Manchester, advising you on how you could perform your poem if you want to make that leap from the page to reading your poem aloud. Oliver Lomax has also added a few tips that he originally used to inspire the group workshop to help. A postcard is contained for you to write your poem down and mail back to Age UK if you feel comfortable about sharing your work.

The poets have been inspired by many things: childhood memories, intense romance, the loss of loved ones and making a positive change for the future. They hope that you will find identification with their work and will take inspiration to create your own. As the participants say "don't be afraid of getting it wrong", "poetry doesn't have to rhyme", "just get your feelings down on paper to begin with" and "give it a go!" You never know, you may discover that you are a poet too!

Good luck and we look forward to reading your poems.

*The Royal Exchange Theatre Elders, Andy Barry
and Oliver Lomax.*

When The Needle Drops

When the needle drops to the speeding shellac
It traces the grooves, from start to finish
Rocking back and forth until the end.
Travelling, travelling across time
Amplifying the scratches and the melody.

We travelled across the watery days
To a new land and a concrete pier
No soil in this new found land,
But a gathering under the alphabet
Before the journey to a new home.

Old records skip and repeat,
And lead to another journey
Due East. Thirty nine miles
And then Due North
To a freezing lake, bordered by purple sands,
Where the storms were more inviting than the calm
And the ice box was filled with ice blocks

The grooves lead on to a faith journey
Nurtured by music, ceremony and companionship
A communion, punctuated
By cubed white bread and Welch's Wine Juice.

A return to a cold February land
Of immersions, cold baths and coal fires
Fires that warmed, both body and spirit

From the soap counter at Boots
To a darkened night club.
And I, dressed in a well-travelled jacket,
Dressed to impress an unknown
Being impressed by an unknown.

A new track leads to another city
Of boulevards and palaces,
And bars echoing sounds from an ill tuned piano
Channelling the ghost of Hemingway,
And nights of talk
And Vesta meals.

A final moment.
A returning journey between Cromwell's town
And the Pennine hills
To a place where two souls
Would meet in a lifelong communion.

Written by Dudley Newell

About the poet: Born in Manchester in 1947, his parents moved to Canada when he was eight, before returning for a 'European' trip in 1969 and getting married in 1970. Enjoying poems by Leonard Cohen (before he picked up a guitar!) and reading some anthologies, Dudley did not feel he really 'knew and understood' poetry despite writing a little. In this poem, every verse picks up an event, in chronological order and the last verse is his attempt to sum up those experiences – in honour of his 50th wedding anniversary!

Poet's tip: For me, writing is a bit like swimming – you dip your toe into the water, and then dive in! Remember IT DOESN'T HAVE TO RHYME! You may remember poetry from school, don't worry about that at all, just jot down the words – as they come. Don't think, 'I wonder if I should put in a 'fancy' word?' Your words are best. It's your poem, so write for yourself!

And when you've written a bit, read it out loud, because you can often 'hear' that something isn't quite right. For example, in my poem, I originally wrote 'When a needle drops to the speeding record'. When I read it out, the word 'record' didn't sound right somehow, so I changed it to 'shellac.'
Above all, have fun!

Up To School

(wet day)

Galloping up the ginnel – beloved brown wellies –
Going for “Annie Oakley” but getting “Minnehaha”
Or even “Hiawatha.”
Crotchety, two faced Hawthorns on the left flank,
Defending, protecting, the steep drop to the cutting.
Pillows of white/pink blossom – subtle scent –
Sweet little siren faces luring to fierce, flesh gouging spikes.
Resist temptation – ride on – remembering past encounters.

Shooting out – cork from bottle – onto the bridge –
Searching for tell tale puff balls – rising, dispersing, disappearing –
grey into greyer, leaden, sky – ears pricked for the deep, gutsy toot.
Obligatory racing side to side – spotting the engine in and out.
Lingering sooty steam.

Down the slope, cantering now - slowing past Gran’s –
In the window waiving – never missing.
Special ‘horsey’ kisses – unrivalled duck egg custard pie.
Homely wisdoms, soft pencilled in her cookery book
“You can’t get lost on a straight road” amongst random recipes for:-
Four kinds of parkin, Furniture Polish,
Beetroot Wine (Mrs Jones – not tried)

On the flat now – frequent delays – rescuing stranded, drowning, worms
from drenched cold pavement to lush green verge.
White crinkled fingers struggling with frantic, slimy, wriggling –
their last bid for freedom – unable to distinguish friend from foe.
Forgiving their thankless Ness, I quest on.

Arriving at the school gate – strangely, not late.
Tossed out of a time warp by Miss Tetlow’s determined
swinging of the big brass hand bell
“Get in line!” “Get in lline!”
And I do –
Lifelong.

Written by Judith Woods

About the poet: Growing up, Judith loved all forms of English lessons including poetry and had periods of writing poetry secretly throughout her adult life. Judith joined the Royal Exchange Elders programme on its inception in 2014 and has never looked back. During the Poetry Workshop, she felt encouraged and supported to be immediate, straightforward and natural in her writing and think about the natural rhythms in her work. Judith says “We gained the confidence to put it out there and we hope you do too!”

Poet’s tip: My favourite word is ‘dwell’. We only hear it today as ‘Don’t DWELL ON it’ and it usually has a sad or low feeling attached to it, but I choose to dwell calmly, peacefully, and as happily as I can. Every time I have a negative thought, feeling or memory, I acknowledge it – then make an effort to replace it with TWO positive thoughts, feelings, or memories. The more I do it the easier it becomes. Sometimes it helps to write things down. Be well in your dwelling.

Cinema Memories

I Run out of the pictures waving my arm
Thrusting my sword or shooting my gun into the dinnertime sun
Whether it's Pirates on the High Seas or Species from another Planet
They were Shot or Skewered to Pieces
I would run home Hitting Lamposts or Rubbish Bins with my Imaginary Sword
"Death To Them All" I would say
I'm Captain Kidd or The Lone Ranger
My Silver Bullets dishing out Justice
Bang, Bang Kerchew Kerchew

The Mattinee every Saturday Morning was a place I wanted to be
I sit there in Wonderment
I Could Dream
My imagination would explode as the stories began to unfold
Black and White or Technicolour would flash Heroes across the Screen
Taking me to their time
How I would sit there
Just watching
Wearing my glasses for my Wonky Eye
Sucking on a Jubbly
It was heaven
Happy Memories of a time gone by
How I wish for those moments again
Pure Innocence of a child's imagination

Now I get to relive it all again , has I play with my Grandchildren
It's the same game
But now with different characters
No more "Flash Gordon" just "Darth Vador"
No more "Lone Ranger" it s "Captain Marvel" or "Hulk Smash"
Grandad has his own "Super Hero". "Mr Tickle"
Just like Superman we change into our Imaginary costumes
Then spring into action
"Batman" says George
"Flash" says James

Then Grandad's Big Entrance "The Great Mr Tickle"
So I do go back there
Watching and Playing those scenes
With my Wonky Eye and Sucking on my Jubbly
Ah Memories of A Time Gone By

Written by Fred Yeomans

About the poet: After suffering a stroke 4 years ago, Fred now attends the Elders Company at 72 years of age, after reading an advertisement with 'Age UK' local paper. New friends have provided the encouragement to write something/ anything and just get the message down on paper. Describing himself as 'not the most literate' Fred had ideas and thoughts to express – Fred says to remember the old saying... "You don't know till you try..!"

Poet's tip:

"Never" Feel embarrassed about what you write down.

"Never" Worry about spelling.

"Never" Think it has to rhyme.

"Never" Wonder if it his good, it is, it's yours.

"Never" Look at a blank page and think, I do not know what to write. Start with a thought and put it down.

"Never" Wonder what other people think. Be proud of what you are achieving.

"Never" Tell yourself, you cannot do this. You Can.

"Never" Doubt yourself. You are cleverer than what you think you are.

"Never" Let a thought seem trivial or mundane. Its great material.

"Never" Think getting dressed in the morning and making breakfast is not a topic to write about.

"Never" Worry life is passing you by.

"Write It" It's your life.

Going Home

I want to go back! Over Sugarloaf Mountain.

Back to Llanelli, and the neat new-pin tidy cul-de-sac of Clys Caradog,

To “cwatch up” with mam, just in time for “listen with mother”.

“are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin”...

(first line of song)

Let me toddle across the skewwhiff landscape of Ffelin Foel, to St Di’s,

And play house with my dad in cottage ruins, cosy with the ghosts of long-dead miners wives.

“Good morning Mrs Jones. Would you like a nice cup of tea?” (me carrying a tea pot heavy with imagination, my father, sipping, pinching the air)

“there’s nice now see!”

(another line of song)

Take me to the docks, where my father would swim out, out,

With me clinging to his broad, burnt back, and mam crying

“Come back! Dont go so far!”

Then, let’s go down to Morfa Green, where I’d sit amongst the cockle pickers,
And feel the sand seeping through my toes, the salted breeze scarging my mouth,

Then the slow slog home. My brother’s like two work-shy horses, ploughing me
in my pushchair over the unforgiving sand dunes,

Whilst dad would carry the spoils of the day in a haversack

That would forever smell of the sea.

(final lines of song)

Written by Marrienne Downes

About the poet: Aged 66, born in Llanelli, South Wales and living with a father from Waterford, Ireland, there was a wonderful mix of Celtic influences in music, poetry and traditions in the house – St Patrick’s Day was the highlight of the year! Brought up in Manchester since the age of 7 and living on the outskirts of Rochdale for the past 40 years, provided a mix Saddleworth Moors and a short tram-ride away from Manchester city.

Poet’s tip: I’ve always loved writing and walks with my father were often embroidered with poems he would recite. He taught me to be fearless with my emotions, and so it became second nature to put pen to paper. This project gave me “permission” to find my voice again and I feel fearless once again. I need inspiration to put pen to paper so reading a poem by a new or favourite poet can sometimes spark an idea that sends me somewhere that surprises me! Concentrate on finding the honesty, and not over thinking this word or that, just go with your gut feeling until the final draft.

Second Coming - Malcom

I'm hitching a lift to work in Cambridge.
You stop: battered Mini with a broken speedo.

You fill the car, bear-like, with warmth and humour.
Reddish hair and beard, untameable.
Spreading belly. Also untameable, or so it seemed as the years passed.

Our journeys settled into a routine.
Comfortable, easy, friendship deepening, falling into each other.

You gave me a shirt that your stomach had outgrown.
For months, it smelt of you, wash after wash,
settling lightly on me yet suffusing me in your scent,
my sense of you.

I still have that shirt but, like you, the smell has gone.

In a hospital in Birmingham I sit holding your hand.
You're in a coma, waiting for a liver transplant that never came.
The nurse tells me that you might be able to hear me,
to respond at some level to familiar voices.

But I am lost to words. Tongue-tied.
I should have said:

I remember how you used to go to the pub with a jumper pulled over your
pyjama jacket.

I remember taking you to a party with my work mates and you telling them that
they were like knitting patterns.

I remember meeting you in London and spending a boozy night in Heaven
dancing.
Well I danced, you watched.

I remember spending time with you by the sea in Norfolk.
Walks along the coast.
Quiet evenings by the fire.
Skate wings and oysters in a local restaurant.

I remember pulling a Christmas cracker with you.
Inside was a piece of paper.
It's fragile now but its message is still clear,
"Our necessities are few, but our wants are endless".

Then you were gone.
Leaving a wife and three children distraught and desolate.
And me with an emptiness like a dark cave, cold, damp,
with the sea murmuring too far away.

Written by Brian Holmes

About the poet: Living between Manchester and Stockport at 66 and working part-time as a counsellor with individuals who are HIV+, Brian came to the Royal Exchange Theatre's Elders Company to try something different. With an opportunity to try a workshop, with a real poet who has published and performed his work, after not writing poetry since school, he felt it was a great chance to explore words that connect and hold meaning and have a go at something new!

Poet's tip: The economy of expression; how a few words can evoke such powerful emotions; the creation of mystery and freeing of the imagination is special. Just picking up a pen and writing for the pleasure of it, whether it is good or not, is worth the risk- who is judging you anyway? If it works, or doesn't, it's fine. Just stop looking at a blank piece of paper and waiting to see if something happens and give it a go... it's only words. Don't judge them. You're not competing with anyone. Play with them, change them, add them, cross them out – see what you end up with. Read them out loud. You might just have written your first poem. Well done!

Songline

Northerners mostly our lot. Derbyshire, Lancashire, Westmorland;
Never far from the Pennines.
There lay our lands of lost content.
We always hankered after Kinder, or Shap, or Pendle.
Tenants or trespassers there, that's who we really were,
though hemmed in, tied down, in town, in Manchester.

We meet our forebears when we drive along
the roads they walked, weaving down to Cottonopolis.
"Go Steady Now," the old ones called as youngsters left
the walls they'd built, the sheep they'd reared.

They followed the water filtering down; stopped
by a mossed stone trough; rested and drank;
cupped and plunged their hands, and drank,

Steady now, you farm-hands, masons, sewing-maids,
you makers of saddles, and lace, and music, and oat-cakes.
Go steady through thrumming Manchester, the racket and shove,
the smoke and the rain in the street, and the wind on the door.

Some fetched up at Lane Ends, in a village soon swallowed by the town.
Were Gardener, and Cook, and Clerk, to the Cottontots
in their big new houses. Dissenters ours were, Choirmen, raisers
of roofs. And, look! pull back the brambles, there!
A founding name on the Chapel wall.

Slow down. Nearer now to my time. A place that's neither here nor there -
a little sunshine - semi on a 30's new estate, in Nowheresville,
Hopeful fresh start for this family of four. All incomers.

Hush! You'll hear my Dad coming home from a long days driving.
His footsteps ring on the frosty pavement. The smell of petrol
on his hands, and always, when I run out to meet him,
there are salted peanuts, deep in his pocket, for me to find. Always.
Look through the curtains. My Mother at the piano, "Rustle of Spring" again.

Perhaps she'll recite for us, fire-lit, excited: "The Highwayman came riding,
riding, riding...."

Then war came. We slept, sheltered in the cellar,
Black box gramophone brought down through the trap-door,
its handle wound up tight against the crump of guns and bombs.
To quick-step "Honey" we'd all sing along, or choirboy brother's treble
might sweeten our dark. Oil-cloth blinded windows shut out
red skies at night. Let out on to shocked morning streets
we children collected shrapnel.

Until, for safety's sake, with gas-mask and carrier bag,
We were lined up and listed, and sent away from home.
Sent away, for safety's sake.

And now, you young ones, you must find your own ways on. New ways.
But, as you go, look back to know your lines that reach from homes as far
as Sri Lanka and Africa. Way back in Meru you will find an old Neem tree
where Nyanya still sings healing. "Kukumbuka - Remember.
Malaika, Nakupenda. - Go steady now, my dears."

Written by Jill Cragg

About the poet: Growing up in wartime Manchester and never leaving Lancashire, Jill liked reading and remembering poetry from childhood. After trying to write in her 70's and 80's, Jill is having another try now, at 86.

Poet's tip: How do you start to write a poem? Well, how do you start to talk? Something starts a thread and you want to share it. Think about how you feel when you find an old photograph you've not seen for years? Or when you first saw the sea? You see, hear, smell and touch things - these are all poems. Everyone's head is full of a wonderful mix of interesting thoughts, and memories. Some are particular to you; some were thought and felt, maybe, by hundreds of other people - maybe centuries ago. Write all those different things that come in to your head. Move them around on the page; stick them together; play about with them on the page. You might find a poem. Share it, please. Good luck!

The Street

A Cul-de-Sac of pumiced steps and window sills; lace curtains and pelmets with frills, no exit for my dreams.

Friendly neighbours with un-paid bills, the race to put new clothes in hock.

Jam butties and banana split. Liquorice sticks and lollipops.

A snooty iron kettle on the black leaded hearth looks down its snout at the greedy Gas Meter that feeds off pennies from the jar and the Wireless and accumulator battery. Sirens and bombs blasted out with Down Your Way and Desert Island Discs promises of happier times when this war is over.

The Piano, a source of joy and laughter. Folks said Dad could play by ear. Mam said, that might be so but better still, It pays for his beer! The joyous sound of voices raised in disharmony blasting out the fears of telegrams and church bells ringing to announce another death.

Like so many my Dad left for work one night and never did return. He's gone to heaven everyone said. I believed them then and went to bed.

Woe-betide anyone who broke the minute needle on the gramophone and stopped Dianna Durban singing "Because" – Her voice trailed in and out of tune because it depended on the winder's aptitude.

The treadle sewing machine hummed in the corner of the room and yards of tulle into wedding dresses did emerge.

Skipping Ropes with mantras such as "Once you get in you can't get out unless you take your end.". that was then. It hasn't changed now..

The big red and white 54' bus. With its running board and the trolley buses in Piccadilly spitting sparks at the Guinness Clock.

Nuns in black and white habits looking like Penguins that walked like Daleks.

The sound of rosary beads dangling from their waists an early warning sound.

The Church Bell boomed loud and long, A Mortal Sin you would incur if you did not go along.

The playing of the organ with its stalactite gold tubes shrill voices praising the lord. You will be redeemed so long as you believe.

Heated irons and rags in my hair to make it beautiful for Sunday Mass. A torturous ordeal perhaps a penance for my sins?

Swinging round the gas lamp on a makeshift rope watching the moths crucify themselves against the heat of the glass.

The 'knocker-upper' – followed by the clunk, clunk of men in clogs who smelt of hops and barley. Wilson's was the local brew.

AND SO IT GOES ON AND I'M ONLY FIFTEEN!!!!

Written by Ann Cole

About the poet: At 82, and part of a Creative Writing group Ann has written a number of stories and poems as well as writing and producing her own play after setting up her own drama group 2 years ago. "Biscuits" was entered into a Drama Festival and "tells the stories of three retired ladies who decide to do what they want in life rather than confirm to what is expected of them." Ann says: "We may be small specks in this Universe but this is where we belong and every one of us has a heart. You must believe in yourself."

Poet's tip: Find some form of illustration at home like a photograph or a picture in a magazine or look through the window for inspiration – something to generate an idea to write – it could even be funny (like a cartoon!) Get people's attention by writing an interesting first line- like the opening of a novel that is intriguing and persuades the reader to read on. Be comfortable with your own ideas and capabilities; allow your mind to wander and enjoy the freedom of expression. Get it down, just write it down!

A Gift From The Old Me To The New Me

“Hide not thy poison with surgar’d words”

Hurrying, hurrying with anticipation, almost running with heightened desire. Stop, stop, wait, stepping back further and further back, humiliating words, violent outbursts.

“The devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape”

Floods of tears and uncontrolled sobbing. Finally, painful sleep takes me.

No stopping dawn breaking into a new day. A painted smile then into a daily routine, keeping shtum my secret lay.

Quite days, words unspoken, the need to understand and finally the start of the conversation that’s banned.

Dark clouds coming in they’re growing in size and strength, senses alerted, sickening panic. Verbal thunder explodes all around, the fear, terror. Lightning bolts hitting like sharp pointed knives.

The pathways to my brain surge into overload then power out, collapse, comatose.

Feeling the ebb and flow of gentleness pass over me, the feeling you have coming round from an aesthetic, slight confusion but feeling safe.

I’m warm, cosy, safe, I’M DEAD.

Gradually eyes read familiar surroundings, able to feel, touch, smell, hear, see, could this be death, is death life or life death.

“My tongue will tell the anger of my heart”

Needing to find a voice, words lodged deep within and a heavy need to spew them out.

Waiting until, waiting is no longer an option, is today the day of my demise. The need to break through the invisible prison wall, walls everywhere in the kitchen where I’m cooking, lounge, bedroom, bathroom into the garden, they’re there, following, how do they know where I am, are they live matter. The car journey to work, leaving my home, the envy of some, perched at the top of a hill looking down on the village and out to sea. Driving down to the dual carriageway join from the slip road, the sea to my left, countryside on my right. The walls still with me following me into work. I don’t speak of them, it would be madness for others to hear.

Escape means death, staying means the same. Die if I stay, die if I leave. The path is clear I have to believe in a once confident, strong me to break free. Freedom is coming, I can almost touch it, I reach but it’s beyond my grasp. I’m knocked back, confidence is waning. Fleeing like a refugee, few possessions, no books, photos, only sleeping on floors, all is gone wiped out in seconds. The pain, understanding why people return, this is worst then being there. Be brave, this will end, there is a future different but better. He always said if you leave you’ll get nothing, he was right except for two things freedom and life.

Written by Jacqueline Corr

About the poet: Born in Oldham in 1952 and having recently moved to a different part of the UK, Jackie is now retired and enjoying life doing new things and enjoying new opportunities. Singing in a choir, acting, writing and meeting new people, Jackie feels there are still plenty of experiences ahead – every day is a bonus! Jackie says: “If you are reading this and wondering whether to have a go at writing, give it a go, we all have a story to tell and who knows you may enjoy it.”

Poet’s tip: Look out of your window, write down what you see, go back again in a few hours and write what you see, keep doing this, then put it altogether YOU’VE WRITTEN A POEM! If a thought comes into your head, stop and write it down and use that thought to start your poem. Forget the spelling and whether it makes sense, it’s not right or wrong – it’s poetry and we all love reading what someone else thinks.

THE SPOKEN WORD

The poets in this collection all believe strongly in the importance of writing for yourself - self-expression is a powerful tool to support your well-being. However, as the poets all belong to the Royal Exchange Theatre's Elders Company they are of course also interested in performing and sharing their poems out loud.

If you find you are home alone, we still encourage you to speak your poem aloud. Hearing your own words out loud can be empowering and it can also help you to redraft your work, so that you find the best words and put them in the best order.

"Sometimes when you read something out loud, you hear it in new ways. You might want to amend it so that it scans better." DUDLEY

Although the process of writing is a brilliant goal in and of itself, it could also be fun to create a mini-performance. You might only have one other person in your household to be your audience and if you live alone, you might not have an actual audience at all, but you should still create a performance for yourself. Speak out.

"People should rid themselves of the fear of being ridiculed. What you believe, is right for you. We may be small specks in this Universe, but this is where we belong and every one of us has a heart. Use it to speak to the world, by writing your thoughts, fears, ambitions - Get it down. Write it. Speak it. Be not afraid of ridicule or incorrectness." ANN

Here are some ideas to help you:

BEFORE YOU SPEAK

- Set yourself a deadline and a time when you are going to read the poem aloud.
- Work out the best room in your house to speak aloud in. A room where you won't be worried about being overheard or disturbing the neighbours.
- Make sure you are comfortable – do you want to stand, or sit?
- Be ready: Good public speakers and actors will do vocal warm-ups to make sure they are in fine voice. Here are some basic tips to help you prepare:

Voice is carried on the breath. Find a comfortable sitting or standing position and take three comfortable breaths in. Think about where your breath starts (in your abdomen) and imagine the capacity of your lungs. Avoid lifting your shoulders, instead push your rib cage out. Don't overdo it, just breath naturally. You could try making a ssssss sound as you breath out.

Voice is breath passing over your vocal chords. Let the sssss sound become a zzzzzz sound. Then, do some gentle humming to slowly wake up your voice. You can try humming in different pitches and sliding up and down or try humming your favourites songs.

Voice is about resonance. Clasp your hands together in front of you (as if prayer) and shake them vigorously. Do this as you breath out making an ahhhh sound and allow your ahhhh to resonate around your chest, throat and mouth.

Voice is about articulation. Trying chewing imaginary toffee to really wake up your facial muscles. Now try some tongue twisters: 'She sells seashells' on the seashore OR 'Eleven malevolent elephants' OR repeat the words 'Mixed biscuits' as quickly as you can five times in a row.

WHEN YOU SPEAK

- Speak with intention – pick a point across the room and send your voice to that point. Imagine your words forming like a rainbow between you and the point.
- Articulate – enjoy the feel of your words in your mouth.
- Take your time and let each word or sentence land in the room.
- Imagine your audience – is it one person? Is it a large audience? The Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester is a theatre-in-the-round – could your audience be all around you? How do these choices change your performance?
- Have an audience in mind, think about the person you're speaking your poem to – does it change the meaning of the poem for you or how you speak it?

This is about having fun and finding value in your own creative words. Don't underestimate how good you are.

Andy Barry

Theatre director and Royal Exchange Elders Programme Manager

For more information about the Elders Programme or the Royal Exchange please visit: www.royalexchange.co.uk/elders or call 0161 833 9833

THE WRITTEN WORD

Tonight

the moon is a searchlight
and it's looking for you
in the loneliest room
of your most abandoned night
remember that the earth
has been waiting for you to happen
all of its life.

Oliver James Lomax

Throughout this time of isolation I have found myself using poetry as a way to connect with the outside world. Memories of times gone by are often a rich palette to begin a poem with and writing about loved ones, both present and past, has allowed me to keep them close by. These little vignettes of descriptive language can often convey the most powerful of emotions and feelings. During this current time of reflection poetry also offers us a way of escaping reality and imposing on the world our hopes and ambitions for the future. Poems can be simple, funny and be inspired by the smallest and most unlikely of subjects, they do not have to be perfect sonnets or rhyme and we hope will offer a little insight into your life no matter how big or small that you can share with others.

I was amazed by the poems created by the Elders in this anthology; most of the work was created by people who had never written poetry before in their lives. I hope that their work and experience will inspire you to begin your own poems. Please share your thoughts and feelings and send them back to us - hopefully your work will go on to inspire others. Here are a few creative ideas that I used with the group in order to inspire and develop their initial writing:

1. Write a short journey poem in the landscape of your memory. Think of 5 places that have shaped your life and describe them: the physical landscape, sounds, thoughts, feelings, memories from childhood up to the present day. You will find examples of this in Fred's wonderful Cinema poem or Judith's Up To School and also in Ann's beautiful poem describing her childhood street.

2. The group found it inspiring to think of their favourite films, quotes, song lyrics and books to conjure memories. Do they take you back to a specific time in your life that you would want to write about? You could even weave some of the lyrics and quotes into your poem. For example, Dudley used listening to records as a way to beautifully describe falling in love with his wife and their life journey together. Marianne's coming home poem is wonderfully inspired by Welsh traditional songs of her childhood.
3. Use photographs as inspiration to describe memorable moments; try to capture in words what the photo has held in an image or capture a moment in time to pass on to future generations. The beautiful use of language in Jill's poem is a wonderful example of describing a journey from the hills and looking at the vision of industrial Manchester.
4. Describe the key events in your life that have enabled you to make positive changes. This approach to writing is a great way to generate ideas, particularly in isolation, and give yourself a mental lift. A Gift From The Old Me To The New Me by Jacqueline is a wonderful example of this.
5. Write a poem to a loved one or friend, to capture them in time or make them laugh. This is beautifully illustrated in Brian's poem about his friend Malcolm. You could write about a person prominent in your life or someone you haven't seen for years- you could even write about a be-loved pet or someone you wish you had met. Let the emotion help you to put pen to paper.

I hope these help to inspire you, feel empowered by the words you write and most of all have fun with it, good luck!

Oliver

Oliver's latest book, "The Dandelion Clock" poetry collection, is due for release in Autumn 2020 and he is currently delivering a number of outreach projects connecting his work with non-traditional poetry audiences including The Working Class Movement Library. For more information about Poet Oliver James Lomax visit www.facebook.com/oliverjameslomaxpoet

