

Gathering Your Distances

LIVING DISABLES us¹, sooner or later. This book records an instance.

Among its other purposes—celebration, witness, seeing justice done, recasting life’s exquisite spell, replenishment of language—lyric poetry, that deeper speaking, consoles like no other human accomplishment. Greg Orr² has argued that all cultures in all times have evolved the lyric poem to help humans, us languaging animals, survive spiritual catastrophe. Lyric poems do this by transfiguring inchoate and unbearable emotion into **habitable** places, intimate architectures of speech, gardens of language; a poem gives to airy nothings “a local habitation and a name.”³ Giving it a name and making it a place, a lyric **poem can** make of a grieving a hearth.

A poem puts your **pain** and delight back among the “family of things.”⁴ For a poem uses language connected to ecosystems of being and meaning and form and sense where one can feel whole, where one’s sorrow has context, where one’s solitude has company. And not merely social.

For each of us is all of us in a poem. The first person is only interesting in a poem, Seamus Heaney wrote somewhere, as an instance. An instance of being. A poem may cry pain, it may **plead** forgiveness, it may be a keening, a rant, an elegy, a refusal to go gently, a prayer. But the particulars of its witness are where it starts, not where it stops; each episode or image stands in a poem as a metaphor for all such **moments—of** anguish, sorrow, regret, desire, despair, gratitude, delight. A poem helps you find the myth in the moment, and so (as writer or reader) endure it. When profound human emotion can recruit the lyric, the personal can become the human, the particular the archetypal. And a collapse of self can become a gathering of distances, a habitat of healing.

It is my hope that a little of that goes on in *A Gathered Distance*. What poetry expresses is not **one’s** self—or not merely. Poetry speaks all our selves.

In that sense, though they start with me, in a life like mine, in a disabling caused by living, these poems are not about me. This is not a memoir. These poems are the sense that poetry could help one human make of a great sadness, “that rust upon the soul,” as Samuel Johnson puts it, that came his way with the end of a marriage and the fracture of a family. His disabling included grief and guilt and bewilderment and all the rest of it. In many ways these poems saved (and possibly improved) this poet. But if that’s all they achieve, they are not the poems he hoped to write. For mine is just one instance of being. And it is one long moment of Being—in its exquisite multiplicity, in its contradictions and chaos and divine **comedy—whose** lyric I hoped to catch here, and in catching it make some sense, somehow, of the senselessness that Being sometimes seems to be.

To live is to move among the lives of others. And these poems wander others’ lives a little. I write of others with what sounds, I hope, like the love I felt; I write others as I write myself, as instances. Forgive me if I’ve fallen short. I thank my children, in

¹ Thomas Szasz in *The Myth of Mental Illness*, favoured “disabled by living” to “mental illness.”

² Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*

³ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

⁴ Mary Oliver, “Wild Swans”

particular, who are often mentioned here, for letting me speak of how some of these past years may have been for them, for us, and I apologize for having inevitably failed to witness, though I have tried, the truth of things for them. I'd like to thank Anne Walsh and Sarah-Jo Huber for seeing me through some of this, and reminding me that life is lyric even when it hurts. Thank you to my partner Jodie Williams with whom I've found joy; I know that poets are, among other things, hard to be with. Thank you to my elder children Michael and Louisa. Thank you to Brian Walters for your friendship, belief and support. Thanks, especially, to my friend Steve Armstrong for the wisdom and solid ground of your friendship, and for conversations in poetry that nurtured me and these poems.

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SOME OF THESE POEMS have appeared, sometimes in different forms and under other titles, in journals and books. Some have won or shortlisted in prizes. Some were commissioned. I thank the editors and sponsors, publishers and judges for their support for my work and their permission to reprint the poems here.

"Pavane": *Almost Everything I Know*, Flying Island, 2014
"Father's Day (Or a Little After)": *Eureka Street*, No. 23, 2013
"Last Night I Went Out": *The Lyrebird*, Picaro 2010, Ginninderra 2017
"Little Lucy & the Tree": *Egret in a Ploughed Field*, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2018
"Desuetude": WRIT Poetry Review, No 1, 2014
"Nightfishing": Ron Pretty Poetry Prize 2014 (Shortlist)
"End of a Lonely Day": ACU Poetry Prize 2016 (Shortlist)
"The Horse": ACU Poetry Prize 2016 (Winner); *The Lyrebird*, 2017; *Egret in a Ploughed Field*, 2018
"Icarus": *Eureka Street*, No.23 2013; *Poem & Dish*, 2014
"Daedalus at Midlife": *Metamorphic*, Recent Works, 2017
"A Gathered Distance": commissioned by Red Room Poetry, written on my residency at Sydney Botanic Gardens, 2017; published in *New Shoots Poetry Anthology*, Red Room Poetry, 2017. (You can read part of the poem on a plaque in the gardens.)
"The Habit of Wings": *AXON C1*, 2016; *Best Australian Poems 2016*
"The River Running Shallow": Newcastle Poetry Prize 2018 (Second)
"Grief Wears a Body": Newcastle Poetry Prize 2018 (Longlist)
"Tomorrow": written for the Bendigo Botanic Gardens as creative in residence at landscape architecture firm TCL; published in *Anthology: An Essay in Plants, Poetry & Image*, TCL, 2017
"The Blue Pasture": ACU Poetry Prize 2019 (Shortlist)
"Picton Morning; Picton Afternoon": *St Mark's Review*, Issue 238, December 2016
"Along the Road": *Sijo: An International Journal of Poetry and Song*, Seoul, 2018
"First Light": *The Lyrebird*, 2017
"Grace, and a Barking Owl": Newcastle Poetry Prize 2019 (Longlist)
"A Forest Inside": *St Mark's Review*, Issue 238, December 2016
"The Fire & the River & the City & the Bush": commissioned by Red Room Poetry and published December 2019 in their Fellowship Shortlist anthology.
"Egret in a Ploughed Field": *Egret in a Ploughed Field*, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2017

—Mark Tredinnick
