

Heather Smith

# POEMS OF JOY AND MELANCHOLY



Illustrations by Marisa Munar

Prologue by Jon Bowra

ARS  POETICA



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| TURRIS BABEL |

ARS  POETICA  
*boutique de poesía*

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*In memory of my Mother and Father*



# PROLOGUE

*by*

JON BOWRA

What impulse drives us to sit down with a blank piece of paper, an empty computer screen and think that we might have something to offer, and could possibly transcribe a jumble of inner stirrings into a moderately intelligible external force? Is it temerity, insanity, or possibly an irresistible force commanding us that somehow manages to overcome our powerful inner critic? Or is it some kind of vanity project that spurs us on to add to the already existing voluminous stock of words produced over the last three thousand years? Indeed, why would we need more words? It could be suggested that we always need more words, although perhaps in our current climate some of them confuse, divert and manipulate us. But what about those words that expand our perceptions into wider

views, further inspirations and act as a warming accompaniment into concealed layers of beauty and magic?

Make no mistake, it is an act of courage to get off the sofa and make a creative contribution for better or worse, for fame and fortune. Although it is more than likely that neither of those particular aspects will easily materialise!

It takes courage to birth sentences and see something of one's soul and spirit sit out there in the light of the world undefended, subject to criticism, possibly neglected. But these are our precious creative offspring and the desire to share the fruits of these births, and thus engage with the reader, is strong. Heather Smith has risen to the challenge of that journey and brings a formidable talent of observation, allied with the ability to fulfil a poetic translation of that seeing into a well-crafted form. She has accomplished that through a life offering no easy path, requiring a good deal of hacking at the rock face of daily existence.

I believe this collection to be a precious offering, and I hope you will welcome it into your hearts and homes, recognising that their origins spring from a deep source. I congratulate Heather on her range of work and I hope that in these challenging and busy times, you will be able to settle for a while to give the nuances and textures of these glistening poetic forms your full attention.

# INTRODUCTION

By

Heather Smith

Why do writers of prose sometimes use the vehicle of poetry, albeit with a certain shyness and certainly with a trembling respect? Why do we almost overcome our fear of transgressing the temple of the sacred goddess and dare to lay our humble offerings at her feet, but at the same time be willing to accept any rejection? It is because even to approach that altar feels close to an initiation.

In my case, I approach the goddess when prose fails; when it is too long-winded or too heavy-footed to capture those moments, thoughts and emotions that must be handled with great delicacy, that are in danger of disintegration when walled in by a construction of solid prose, however worthy. Prose describes, narrates, pins down

and nearly always leads us to satisfactory or logical conclusions. But poetry points to layers of ourselves that are not always visible or easily uncovered. It can be an invitation to go beyond those words we struggle to find, words which are pointers to the subconscious, to the mystery that surrounds us, to the unknown that will finally engulf us all. It is as if our soul writes through us to lift the veil of our being so we glimpse the big silence where spirit resides.

There is also freedom in verse; we sense we have greater liberty to write about our own secret history; for what is permitted in poetry might be felt as sacrilege in prose. The poetic form protects our vulnerability; we feel safer expressing emotions, feelings, thoughts, happenings, even though they may hide behind images. Poetic licence allows us to approach the unnameable, to sing of our fears, joys, losses and memories; it allows us to overcome a certain timidity of showing our nakedness to others. We are, in a sense, sheltered by the poetic form. For me, a poem, however simple, somehow demands respect and calls for gratitude to the poet for allowing us to see his or her private world and to how it may connect to ours. Of course poets also give voice to the times we live in, to the tragedy of war and social injustice. Yeats, for example, honours the nature and character of Ireland and the Irish in his ear-

lier poetry. But the medium of verse and poetic imagery can delve into deep undercurrents and reveal ambiguous truths which ring true when the poet writes from the inside, as Yeats does. He is Ireland in his poems.

Another Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, spoke of poetry's function 'as an agent of possible transformation, of evolution towards that more radiant and generous life which the imagination desires.' In my case I would say that in writing these poems I experienced, not without difficulty, my own subtle transformation in attempting to translate moments of significance into a language that the imagination accepts. The struggle between the pressure to tell one's truth and the need for imagination to make that truth more bearable is constant. Even when we must peer into the dark, the imagination can find a stark beauty; and joy can be found for a time in recognition. For there is something redemptive about poetry; it is about peeling off the layers that hide who we, or others, truly are in essence. And there is also beauty when we approach the depths of the abyss, even when fear or sorrow prevent us from giving a longer glance, as in the death of a loved one, or when witnessing the slow collapse of someone or something precious. It is the sharp beauty found in suffering that our human conscience allows us to experience and transcend through art forms.

And so I offer the reader these words moulded into verse and hope you will find and feel some affinity with them. For this small collection is a memoir of moments, of joy and melancholy, the threads of life. Verse can be a capricious gift that allows us to inscribe our fragile memories, without which we have nothing. We can look back and say: I felt that, I thought that, I glimpsed that. Hence some of the poems pay homage to elusive moments which I tried to capture before they slipped away into the dark tunnel of oblivion; and some speak of loss, longing, doubt and melancholy which pursue us all while we are on this earth.

As for form, I have used the non-constraining vehicle of free verse in the poems, with the exception of *Should Have* which is a quatrain of alternate rhyme. I trust the greater freedom that comes with using free verse is not detrimental to the rhythm and musicality that I hope can be perceived in the poems.

Two poems, *Momento* and *Intercambios*, are written in Spanish, with an English translation. I have lived on the beautiful island of Mallorca for over forty years, have a degree in Spanish philology, and am bilingual. Even though I usually write in my mother tongue, English, these two poems demanded to be written in Spanish. Both poems and their translation come at the end of the book.



*Intercambios* was written from the perspective of a Majorcan student on a school exchange to Sheffield about the impact of the harshness of that northern city on students used to the softer, more relaxed Mediterranean way of life. It is also about how bridges can be built to connect different mentalities and transform what can sometimes be an insular view of life.

*Momento* describes a brief interlude of lightness, a moment of respite at a difficult turning point of my life when there were no certainties to uphold me. It is also a moment of gratitude to the unexpected generosity of my surroundings, those indifferent onlookers, which lifted my spirit to a realm where personal suffering is absorbed into a vaster reality.

Joy and melancholy, doubt and certainty, are often mixed in the poems as is also the need for silence, wherein enigmas reveal their secrets and some kind of truth is glimpsed, with the difficult shedding of emotional layers that this entails. But if any classification is possible, the following poems could be considered expressions of the joy felt in precious moments:

*Orchid*, on a lighter, simpler note, tries to capture the moment of brief splendour of an orchid, with its vulnerable roots starved in minimum soil, and the joy in giving it to someone who is aware of its short lived perfection and

so appreciates its loveliness more intensely. The transience of natural beauty, of all life forms, never fails to surprise, dismay and fascinate me.

*Here in BuenVino*, written during a retreat in Huelva, Andalusia, expresses the joy, both sensuous and emotional, of the luscious beauty of the natural surroundings, an enclave where a few human beings have managed to blend in with their surroundings, have almost allowed nature to take over instead of upsetting the delicate balance with a heavy hand. This small portion of paradise on earth opens our senses and sensibilities to the colours, sights and sounds that so often go unnoticed in our daily lives. It is the satiating of a modern hunger for contact with natural beauty, an ever growing need in an age where misused technology and the synthetic dominate. The delight in the rediscovery of nature, away from stress, artifice and concrete, and the indulgence of the five senses, also elevates the spirit and stimulates creativity. In this temporary oasis barriers fall, words flow and hearts open to strangers, for the communion with nature also makes us aware of our basic interconnection with other human beings. A microcosm of joy, beauty and respect for the other which lasts seven days; and an example of what our ailing world could be like.

*A Blessing*, one of my later poems, is an acknowledgement of the inner child after years of imagining she was buried in the psyche, but who reappears to help me rediscover the innocence in my adult heart. She also brings the gift of remembering moments of a period of my childhood in the beautiful county of Devon and days of freedom walking over its lush green hills breathing soft, unpolluted air. Blessed remembrance, when memory can still re-live the magic of finding derelict railway banks covered in fragrant primroses!

*Nottingham*, a city I visited during one of the Spanish-English exchanges I went on in my role as a teacher at a Majorcan school, is another song of gratitude to the place, the moment and the person who was accompanying me. On a hill overlooking the small city of Robin Hood, the silence of the morning only broken by birdsong, I received a fleeting gift: a profound sensation of eternity, an unexpected lifting of the veils that hang between our small temporary worlds and the one we are truly immersed in. The sensibility of my companion, every blade of grass and the monumental but indifferent castle above us never fade in my heart and mind.

*Akasha* is a little hymn to the universal home and cosmic 'library' that the Akasha represents. It is the result of my period of study and experimentation with the Akashic

Registers and a reflection on the peaceful beauty that can be found there. Music has been composed for this song which is often listened to in seminars on the Akashic Registers.

*Nothing to Do* arose from one of those rare moments when inner peace comes easily, naturally; when release from external pressures is mirrored in a fleeting inner freedom. It was a moment of great simplicity when I could become attuned to the universe through a bird's song, the beauty of sunlight dappling the leaves of a tree that I usually have no time or inclination to notice. Compared to *Another Chance*, this moment is indeed an unexpected gift, since mostly I pursue and do not often experience such simple but powerful bliss.

*Another Chance*, in which there is a shift from the expression of joy to one of longing, was written at a time when I was ill and had to spend some time alone. Loneliness became a friend because solitude lends itself to meditation, a practise that has become part of my life, especially in my later years. The poem reflects on how difficult it is to achieve a state of silence, which is like an elusive god that rarely bestows the blessings and insights that come with a quiet mind.

Similarly, *Naked*, arose from the need to strip away all the layers I, we, accumulate over life; the need to be re-

leased from so many theories that often obscure or hinder our connection with self and the source of life. When we are naked the soul pokes through our uncluttered conscious and speaks its truth, like the wild roses pushing through crumbling walls.

*Should Have*, is a poem on how even when slumped in laziness and inactivity, there is a part of our mind which is always fertile, always ready for new seeds to be planted; on how another art form like music, or another poem, can stir us awake to the challenge of creating again. The pursuit of words that can open doors to the subconscious is a constant chase, where the right ones nearly always elude us or where there simply aren't enough to describe the vast world that lies below the surface. But however insubstantial words may be, they are my only vehicle to express what weighs in my heart and imagination.

The following poems are a melancholic reflection on the brevity of life, loss and doubt but they are at the same time an expression of the beauty found in sorrow and uncertainty. They are the other side of the coin: the intransience of all that is part of the human condition and the suffering that inevitably goes hand in hand with it. But as the Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran says in *On Joy and Sorrow*: 'The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.'

There are four poems which express the disbelief that comes with the loss of loved ones; they also attempt to express the stern beauty of death, of the return to stillness and of the beloved flesh to spirit. Yet on a more superficial level, we ask how to deal with that physical disappearance, with that silent void, when our minds are bursting with vivid memories we hope will not fade.

*Mum* was written under the impact of my mother's death three years ago and the need to recreate images of her which denied her physical passing; it was the need to paint a tangible picture which I could look into and find there her eternal presence.

*Abyss* arose from contemplating the vibrant blossoming of my granddaughter and reconciling it with the fathomless silence into which my mother fell, the abyss which awaits us all but which we are fearful to look into. It is the mysterious conjunction of life and death, the outer attraction of transience combined with an inner sense of the eternal which is a gentle murmuring we rarely hear until a death obliges us to listen and to look into the void.

*Seaford* is a small town on the southern coast of England where my parents lived their last thirty years. It was written from nostalgia not only for the loss of my parents but also for the loss of the surroundings, the country walks, the grey-green sea and the unassuming little town. So I

walked with their ghosts through all the places they and I loved and witnessed how their ashes swirled down again into the English Channel.

*Moix*: any animal lover knows how painful the death of a pet is. This poem is simply the outpouring of that pain and a little homage to a beautiful cat who gave me many years of company and joy.

After the poems written about personal loss comes one written many years ago under the shock of seeing death on mass caused by the tsunami in Indonesia in 2005. *Bodies* is the attempt to assimilate the apparent meaninglessness of the loss of lives from the impact of a natural catastrophe. It is the expression of our vulnerability, of the strength and beauty still to be found in our fragile existence, perhaps more beautiful because of it.

Both *Bodies* and *Mum* have been adapted to music by the singer-songwriter Steven Munar.

Three poems reflect on the passing of time, the mystery of aging and the holding on to life with weak hands but strong desires.

*Hibiscus* arose from the poignancy of watching how a hibiscus, which I had planted years ago, was slowly drying out however much I nurtured it. When I thought it had died it suddenly produced its last flower. The tenderness of those moments were an indicator of how any form of life is

genetically pushed to produce some kind of fruit even at the end of its existence; the life force, even though dwindling, never gives up creating in some way or another.

*Dancing Shoes* came from a very lucid dream and from how we carry our own personal dream to our very death bed. It is also about the need to cherish and respect another's dream, if we are allowed to glimpse it, since this is the hidden treasure that gives meaning and guidance to that life.

*Stories*. How many stories do we carry in our backpacks and how many do we want to tell when we reach our later years? How many of them have an element of fiction to make life more bearable? The hesitancy to begin a new relationship is often related to the weight of our stories which we erroneously see as our identity; but the telling of them is the only bridge to communicate with the other however much we eye each other with caution.

And finally *Epiphany*, a poem I wrote on the 5<sup>th</sup> January, eve of epiphany which is celebrated in Spain as the Day of the Three Kings. It arose from a certain frustration and sorrow at the slow destruction of our planet. What does epiphany mean in a world which is sunk in materialism and no longer reveres the sacred even though the majority still pay lip service to its celebrations? The soul of our ail-



ing planet and the sacred must be sought now under the debris we have heaped upon it.

What began as an inner dialogue has now hopefully become a way of communication with others of this constant dance of joy and melancholy. The poems speak of joy, doubts, fears, childhood, aging, glimpses of eternity, sorrow and most importantly of love, without which there is no vision. All of this speaks to us all, touches us all at some point of our lives; thus it is a universal language which has been written and spoken many times. My humble contribution is but a drop in that vast ocean.

The paintings that illustrate the poems are the work of the Majorcan artist Marisa Munar, who has a special talent for reflecting the shifting colour and light of Mallorca. In this case, with a few brushstrokes of alcohol-based paint, she has captured what for her is the predominating theme or central idea of each poem in a striking minimalist style whose energy vibrates with the essence of the poems. Some illustrations are purely abstract, of Japanese influence, whilst others, on a closer look, reveal objects and beings related to the poems.

It is no easy task to translate the essence of a poem into a different art form, but Marisa has carried this out in illustrations in which both strength and delicacy are present in the bold simplicity of their forms. They are inter-

pretations of inner and outer landscapes where the abstract usually, but not always, coincides with the former. My thanks to her for the sensitive reflection of another's particular universe in a different art form.

Jon Bowra, to whom I am eternally grateful for his encouragement to keep on writing and whose advice has been invaluable, is himself the author of three magically wry and soulful volumes of poetry, and has many others piling up waiting to be published. He is interested in Jung, nature, writing, ideas and community building. He has collected a handful of degrees, two of which include an M.A in Social Sculpture and Sociology with a specialisation in giving quality of life to the elderly and end-of-life palliative care. He lives in woodland on the south coast of England with his wife and cat.

Heather Smith

*Poems of Joy And Melancholy*

Illustrations

*by*

Marisa Munar



## ORCHID

Will it suffer, I ask,  
Will the delicate petals  
Wither and fall in  
Unwanted winds,  
As hurriedly homewards  
I go, embracing this beauty  
In its mingy pot.

Should be growing long  
Roots in the wild,  
Putting out feelers  
In the dank soil,  
Not cooped in mean plastic,  
There to embellish  
Precious little havens  
With generous perfection.

I offer you this loveliness,  
You who understands  
Captured splendour,  
You who savours  
As no other,  
Each trapped marvel.



# HERE IN BUENVINO

*Huelva, Andalucía. 2018*  
*For Elaine*

Turquoise shutters  
Woolly brown dogs  
Sweet chestnut oaks  
With hallucinatory powers  
And mysterious hollows.  
Miles of woodland spreading  
With spaces for secret ponds,  
Muddy *pata negra* pigs  
And huddling sheep.  
Here in BuenVino.

Evening swallows swooping  
Over patios and *balcones*,  
Owls calling like distant sirens,  
Bats black as night bumping  
Into candlelit dinner tables  
Under canopies of leaves.  
A Spanish English house aligned  
With moon and stars  
Slowly becoming the earth  
That upholds it,  
Slowly moulded by wind, rain  
And generous sun.  
Slowly moulding Jeannie and Sam,

Magicians of food and colour,  
Good humour and kindness,  
Into icons of BuenVino.

The stillness of the morning,  
The humming of the universe,  
Gently, powerfully disturbed  
By crowings and twitterings,  
By barking Spanish water dogs.  
And then the awakening house,  
Clattering feet down stone stairs  
And laughter at breakfast table  
Spread with manna from BuenVino.

Purple and green figs roughly pulled  
Spilling sweetness into greedy mouths  
On long meandering walks.  
Squashed éclairs, a generous thought,  
Fed to undeserving gluttons,  
Next year's gourmet *jamón*.  
Wafts of mint, crushed oregano  
Plucked along the wayside,  
Along the way to white villages  
With empty cobbled streets  
Betrayed by noisy bars  
With blazing televisions.  
And always the desire  
To return to BuenVino.



We write, companions and strangers,  
With scratchy pens on virgin white paper  
Bound in scary black notebooks.  
Churning and churning hearts and brains,  
The words tumble and spill,  
bitter and sweet.  
Shall I write it, shall I say it  
To these four *extraños*  
With their broken generous hearts  
And quick clever minds shielding  
Sacred spaces, hidden altars  
Where love and sorrow are mixed,  
Mixed in the same chalice?  
Tough fragility that sheds warm tears  
Or laughs too loudly  
Or nothing says.  
And we do, I do, write it down  
With indifferent onlookers,  
The hills and the stripped cork trees,  
Their bark as vulnerable as us  
As we peel away a few layers  
And hope it won't hurt.  
All of you, all of this are NOW,  
Part of the wondrous NOW  
And part of me forever.  
At BuenVino.