

Redbrick Writers

2023

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Introduction

In 2023 the Redbrick Writing Group has met monthly since February. Over that time, we have shared ideas, thoughts, and feelings in person and on paper. We have read and been inspired by a range of writing, including our choice of favourite poems from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. We have written on a vast range of topics including contemporary events; Liverpool Streets and parks; concepts of light and darkness; and themes of playing and life lessons. This is a *selection* of our writing.

This year has been a horrible year of violence and conflict internationally. Many of us have had a hard time dealing with our personal griefs, stresses, and illnesses. It seems to me that this only makes it more important to come together as a group to experiment with writing and listen to each other.

Shirley

I write because

it's the first thing I could do

because I love reading

because writing allows me to see inside stuff

because words can show everything

because it can be cathartic

because I'm not making anyone's ears' sore

because imagination is churned and tumbled

because the words look lovelier on the page

I write because it saved me from death

It's my superpower ...

Annette, Shirley, Catherine, Channy, Brenda, Andrea, Paula, Georgina, Julian and Sue.

My heart is...

My heart is like a raspberry pi
that makes my complexities
accessible to you.
Stripped down to its essentials and then stupefied
used merely as a stepping stone.

My heart is like an algorithm
that has consumed enough of you
it anticipates your next expectation of me.
Optimal for the reduction of glitches.
Optimal for the prevention of a crash.

My heart is like an iOS update,
that requires shutting down before trying again.
Supplying new updates based on novel incidents.

My heart is like a mouse.
Quiet.

My heart is like a tiktok
that replays the same 60 seconds
when left open and abandoned.
Without resolve it threatens to endlessly cycle
through tired thoughts.

My heart is like the cloud
that can be accessed anywhere at any time.
It doesn't rely on nor is it limited to physical closeness.
It's fed full with an inexplicable abundance
of treasured memories, souvenired.

My heart is like an iPod shuffle
that is stirred by sentimentality.
Its deteriorating parts become incompatible
as it ages out of demand.

My heart is like Alexa
who is compliant.
It issues the same auto-piloted response
to confrontation
to criticism.

My heart is like a HDMI cable,
that detaches at the slightest knock
but can be temporarily re-connected with force
where it pushes power through fault lines.

My heart is like a Google account,
that compartmentalises.
It holds solutions to all problems,
should the user find it friendly?

My heart is like an unsecured network,
that overburdens my bandwidth.
Often unmanned due to dissociation
the lines are unsafe.

My heart is like social media
it's dwelling and disingenuous.
It was sold as a connectivity
but not everything is made better with you.

Georgina Tyson

Mer

Your spiral and curls are all of the world to me.
You fall and rise with no stutter or slip.
And you and the sky comfort each other in a line of perfectly ruled felt grip.

Crash harder I hope sometimes.
Crash softer, gentler.

My transparent silk,
teeming with life.
Let the seagull shout over you.
So I can ignore the world.
As the moon guides you, you let your heart be churned.

I get to feel the push and the pull of you, biting or soupy
I fight against you, I let myself float in you.
My smooth, rough, serene friend of green, black and blue.
Though you rock, sway and tip
my balance is you.

Beth Crowder

Three Streets (July 4th)

Hardman:

Heading down hill
looking for that sunflower
daring to grow
from the corner of Subway
just a stalk now
but where the flower might have been thrown
a splat of yellow
a grey-handled brush
with Van Gogh's bristles splayed

Bold:

A silver haired woman
oh, I knew her once?
she had different hair
did I know her well?

Guitar hanging loose
fag in his hand
the Mexican man's outside
the wrong café.

Church:

The god squad have moved along
and the man with the plastic microphone
is having a day off
instead, the world's worst Elvis
is murdering a hound dog

Shirley Jones

Granby Street

Under the red and white candy stripe sign above his door
Pee Wee, the Barber sits outside his shop
on a bare wooden chair.
He strums a calypso tune on a five-stringed guitar
and sings about lost love,
not a woman but his Island-in-the-Sea.
He sips rum from a glass beside his sandalled feet.
His lips glisten.
Eyelids droop.
He slowly gets drunk.

African Mary dressed in her Kente cloth
buys a boiler chicken from the Welsh butcher.
Tells her it has to be 'good one'
as the last one shrank in the pot.
She helps herself to a drumstick lollipop
from a jar on the counter.
The butcher's wife is as broad as an ox
the hackles on her rump, flank, and neck,
bristle beneath her apron.
She curls her fingers into meaty fists,
points at African Mary and tells her
that the lollipops are for children only.
African Mary replies that she is a child of God
and sucks loudly on the lollipop as she exits.

Reggae music blares out from Juniors Record Shop.
Young men gather outside in groups to talk,
Some lounge in cars nodding to the
Easy lull,
Easy pull
of the soft rhythmic sounds.
Marijuana clouds emerge from lips and drift away,
But the smell lingers on clothes, hair, skin
Never leaving them,
Not completely.

Fred is there telling jokes in his witty way.
Years later he would have a psychotic break.
become known as Fred The Pennies.
Handfuls of copper coins in his hands
flinging each one with force
against the Street's pavements,
trying to catch them as they,

bounced,
arced,
flipped.

Nabile, the retailer adopted the name Tony.
Handsome, funny, with a young family
he fled Yemen after supposedly killing a man.
No blood drips from his hands
as some adults say it does.
A few kids look for it, some even ask.
They are chased out of the shop by those raised hands,
which suddenly thrust themselves
into deep pockets.
He sniffs at the marijuana as it drifts into his shop,
listens to the strange, soothing music playing outside.
It lifts him and carries him to a warm safe space,
which is all he needs in this living street.

Paula Frew

Refuge at the Rotunda

Refuge is a weight off her shoulders,
Sighing, she sits, sips a cuppa tea.
The café assistant gifts her time.
Welcoming with bright eyes, a warm smile.

Apron on, hands full, minimum wage.
She works hard, two jobs for a start.
A refuge, we rest in her company.
Ev'rybody is a somebody.

Refuge is a bowl of Scouse, served hot.
His only meal of the day. She sees,
And serves extra bread to dip in.
They share a quiet joke, he's at ease.

Everyone's names are remembered.
Week to week, acknowledged, accepted.
Refuge, a hand on tired shoulders.
Kind words, that rallies and bolsters.

Refuge is Lynsey looking after you.
It feels like a warm faux fur blanket.
Refuge is not feeling neglected.
It's feeling cared for, loved, connected.

Sue Cunningham

Thunder Rumbling

'Thought I heard the thunder rumbling in the sky' (W H Auden) but it was only the match kicking off.

Atmosphere electrified the ether as football royalty watched from their VIP seats. Their Mercedes' being polished in their reserved spots, at the ground, as they cheered and booed.

One hundred yards away in Gorst Street, Irish Sheila emptied her purse onto the table, £1.25. Her bank card swallowed by the Goblin in the hole in the wall.

It was a warm day so she sat on the step, hoping for a change in luck but not expecting it. Another thunderous roar filled the air and whooping poured out from neighbouring houses.

Sounds like we've scored she thought, using her adopted jargon. At half time, the youngest lad appeared from next door, restless from the previous 45 minutes of restraint.

'Hello' Sheila said. He had a packet of revels and offered her one. He didn't speak, just tilted the pack towards her.

Annette Mackinnon

Park Life

There was a slow dance of avoidance as a football whizzed past, swiftly followed by two small legs racing to catch up with it. The sun sparkled in places and blurred chinks of light settled among lightly waving tree boughs. Sepia colours defined the leaves.

Rustling underfoot as park life scuttled about. Some remembered shapes were of bushy tailed park rodents burying nuts in any available spaces. They were glimpsed acrobatically leaping from plant pot to plant pot, clinging to tree trunks as they raced upwards. Dogs were occasionally spotted scavenging after a ball or hoop thrown by their owners.

Remembered pathways are solid, pebbly, tarmacked or squishy in parts. Carefully mapped out steps can keep one on the straight and narrow, guide around corners, cross grassy areas or head for directed fixed points. Occasionally keep fit equipment is identified but not the open invitation to come and try. Signposts are etched out on dark backgrounds.

Benches are scattered about the grounds. A mix and match of cold gaily painted ones and commoner garden wooden ones. Both provide places for aged tired bodies, arthritic limbs, lithe limbs, doggie paws to rest on. Some wooden benches have a heavy worn patina from crowds of people sitting there over time. People sitting to catch a breath as shopping bags are placed beside them. Parents resting to placate restless children, mates meeting up.

Sitting spaces are used for gossiping, a ciggie, hellos and goodbyes, an assignation or two, the covert packet of sherbet passed between fist bumps. Some benches have faded thin plaques with names that are preserved in time and other people's memories.

There is a cacophony of noises and sounds. Dogs bark loudly as they race about with their mates, chase balls or in response to their owners calling them to heel. Ducks quack as they saunter back and forth on the lazy lake. There are shapes of others calling out to children or screeching at their mates. The jubilant roars of those on the side lines as offspring score goals at a Sunday footie match.

There is much joy remembered of the many walks in and around this park. The observer sat silently caressing a name plaque drinking it all in. Colours were mentally compartmentalised. Uneven shapes became fully formed and consigned to memory. Well trodden pathways and directions were firmly etched on their brain. Senses and smells were heightened and would be brought to mind as time went on. All of this was to be preserved in memory.

The observer knew that these images would visibly blur and fade as the darkness slowly closing in on their fast encroaching blindness was inevitable.

Catherine Jewell-Davis

Day trippers

Terry depended on the predictability of the number eighty-two. He boarded each day at six forty-five and took the same seat if it was available so his view would never change. When the bus reached the vale on the hill he could see the horizon split into strips: the burnt amber of the evening sky, the Clywdian mountains underneath, the river's oily reflections of the setting sun, and the city below it all, wearing the heavens on its shoulders.

Helen could be heard before the doors wiped open. The suspension wheezed and the bus knelt for the pram rattling up alongside. Terry followed Helen's march, watching her swivel to fuss at the boy behind her who had stopped to pick a dandelion.

"Fucking hurry up," she roared, the gravel in her voice eroding to thank the driver as she raised the pram on board with a huff.

"Helen!" Terry called out. She pulled her boy by the arm and the dandelion stalk slipped between the doors as they drew closed. Helen waved at Terry and parked the pram in the bay reserved for mothers and worn-out knees.

"There's the handsome fella," Terry said, offering out a low five to Thomas, who stared at the big bear paw sheepishly. One hand pulled at his lip as the other stroked the open palm softly, and he fidgeted at its coarseness. Helen planted Thomas behind Terry and mouthed at him to be good.

"He'll be as big as me soon," Terry said.

"I should hope so, he's going to need it", Helen said, taking her seat next to him. "Did you see the news? That poor kid."

Terry grunted. "Aye, miserable business."

"Gone to the dogs, this place. Hasn't it? The dogs." Helen held her palms outward to the sky. Terry wasn't sure if it was an act of disbelief or pleading to whoever she thought was listening. He shifted his shoulders and faced the window to watch the world come at him. Helen reprimanded Thomas for standing on his seat and pressing his cheeks against the glass. Terry looked at the boy, and the pram, and Helen's hair. She still tied it how she did in school.

"I've had it with the place, Terry. It's just animals out there now. I'm itching to leave."

"Is that right?" Terry said, flitting between here and then, the pair of them sat in their uniforms in an identical arrangement. Mud lined his trouser hems; her cardigan was tied around her waist. She would initiate sing-a-longs out of boredom. They would pretend passing cars were runners at the Grand National — her taking on the role of commentator to make him laugh. He used to believe she could sense the motion in people and draw it out like a sponge. He would watch her legs kick restlessly against the seat the whole bus ride home, this kid so bursting with wonder it seemed like she would explode.

"You just have to worry about the kids don't you?" Helen said.

“You do,” Terry said.

The bus reached the vale and the pair turned to look through the thin window pane over the city, shimmering in the evening glow. Dusk weaved fantastic oranges into blues and the darkness hovered above, waiting to be cast over their world like a fishing net.

“I just don’t want them growing up in a place like this. It’s all gone to shit.”

Terry wanted her to start singing again.

“I mean, what hope have they got?” She tilted her head towards Thomas. They turned to look at the boy swinging off the seat headrest, giggling words from a language that was alien to them now.

“It is scary though, don’t you think?” Helen said.

Terry looked at the boy’s pink face, contorting in joy. “Yes, it is scary,” he said.

Alex Bennett

Playing

The same song had been playing on the radio that night. That one about loss and being alone and never finding the way back. The ending was lost to DJ chatter, but she remembered the words and how they had seemed like nothing to do with her the night she had first heard them. How sad and blue they had sounded - all wrong for the night that she would always remember as a bright star, the last bright star perhaps.

It was nearly the last conversation she had had with her, but that was part of the sadness of final things, they did not announce themselves as such until afterwards, when everything was too late.

And if she had paid some attention, not been so caught in the gin, slow and sharp on her tongue, or the lazy movement of the lit-up buoys a way away on the waves or the style of Isobel's words that fit themselves to her own so well, then she might have noticed, understood that Isobel was trying to say something without saying it.

She must have known.

That there would not be many more nights like this. Friendships that last forever never do, and that someone must be the first to leave, to unbind hands and move away. To leave and never look back. She tried once, and then again, to imagine how Isobel might have felt. It was painful, but that did not mean it could not be imagined: to slip into her shadow, to have that weight all over her skin. It must have been an unbearable thing. Watching the rope that tied you loosen, unravel. Sensing yourself moving through the air, a mad cry of an animal in the dark. The final notes of a song in a bar that was written for you.

Channy Das

The House of Horrors

It all began when my Aunt's daughter, my cousin Heather, was flying out to Libya for a month to join her husband Eddie, who had been sent there for 6 months with his work.

My Aunt Alma lived in a really weird-looking house, I always thought. Heather visited her every day. I used to ask her what *she* thought of the house. She'd pull a bit of a face and say she wouldn't like to live there herself.

Now, Heather had asked *me*, could I spend a lot of time with her Mum while *she* was *away*.

'What did she mean by *a lot of time*,' I wondered. I certainly wouldn't fancy *sleeping* there. However, I was concerned about Aunt Alma being all on her own, so I promised, I'd keep a close eye on her.

It was winter-time, not the best time to be getting more closely acquainted with a house which had the ability to make me feel apprehensive and threatened.

It wasn't as though Aunt Alma was very frail; she was quite agile and wiry for her age, but she was rather deaf, which made the conversation difficult, and sometimes at cross-purposes.

The first day I arrived at lunch time with some soup and fresh warm bread. Alma was delighted and made me very welcome. While we were eating, I suddenly heard a scratching sound, and I asked could she hear it, which of course, she couldn't.

I thought maybe this is how she could live here, she couldn't hear things that were going on. The scratching continued, getting louder. I thought mice or rats – I was distraught, I thought 'Rice or mats!' But whichever way the consonants were placed, the fear was the same – she could be overrun in no time.

I turned suddenly and saw what looked like a big eye looking at me from just round the door.

'*That's* no mouse or rat', I said to myself. I didn't know *what* it could be. It looked almost like a huge human eye, but the expression in it was so menacing that I was shaking. When I glanced up again, it had gone.

'Someone's watching us,' I thought. 'I don't like it, and I'm sure I shouldn't tell Aunt Alma.' With the appearance of the evil eye, the scratching sound had disappeared. The atmosphere seemed to lighten a bit as well, as though a heavy curtain of oppression had lifted.

Alma asked me if I could do some shopping for her that afternoon, as there were one or two little jobs she wanted to do. She gave me a shopping list and I went to the local shops. They said they knew Alma well; she's a very sprightly lady for her age, always rushing about.

'But how can she live in that *house!*'

My concern returned right away, and I wanted to draw them out about it.

'Well!', one of the shopkeepers said. 'We knew the lady who lived there *before* your Aunt, and she got so terrified in the end that she moved out – and then your *Aunty* was the next tenant. Weird happenings that couldn't be explained – it really drove her to the brink. We think she got out in time before she had a complete mental breakdown!'

I was really scared for Aunt Alma now. But she'd been there about 6 years now and hadn't said about anything really. It's true she was deaf, but there was nothing wrong with her sight. Yet that eye I saw, I thought it best to keep quiet about it to my Aunt.

I mentioned it to the shopkeeper and she went pale.

'When the eye appears, that's just the *start!* It seems to be the instigator of much worse things to come!'

I was really terrified now, for my Aunt and myself.

'Did your *Aunt* see the eye?' the lady said.

'No, it was only I myself who saw it,' I replied.

The shop lady looked at me hard.

'Then be very careful!' she said. 'It's the person who *sees* the eye who's in for all the trouble!'

Wild panic gripped me, and my natural instinct told me to go home and not go back, but my conscience won, and, with my heart beating about 200 times a minute, and the shopping bags shaking in my hands, I reluctantly set off towards my Aunt's **House of Horrors.**

Brenda Roberts

A Dark Tale with some Bad Weather

I was in the shower when the doorbell rang distracting me from the warm water running down my face. I had my eyes shut. It was a shrill ringing that seemed to have an air of urgency about it, if that's not too fanciful an observation. It was a sunny afternoon, a bright October day, I'd been out in the garden tidying up, digging out the weeds, cutting back the dead parts of the plants. A sunny day with a bit of an Autumn chill about it. I opened my eyes as if that would make the ringing clearer and observed through the frosted bathroom glass that the sky had suddenly darkened and a pitter patter of rain was hitting the panes. The water was heating up, taking the chill from my body. I'd felt warm outside til I'd dug up those bones beneath the Azalea bush that never seemed to flower and I'd decided it needed to go. The bush had long roots and the bones were embedded amongst them. I'd pieced them together and they appeared to make up the skeleton of a cat or some other small animal. The ringing persisted as if the bell was stuck or somebody's finger was stuck on it, but my hair was soapy, still needed rinsing off, I had no intention of running downstairs, dripping wet with a towel round me to see who it was. And now there was a hammering of rain on the window, a cloud burst. I squeezed the Coconut Conditioner from the bottle. My hair was longish these days, touching my shoulders, grey hair that spent its life tied back in a pony tail. I didn't know what else to do with it. Some inertia causing lack of purpose remained with me from Covid times.

When the vegan formula conditioner for frizziness that was going to make my hair manageable was finally washed from my now tangled hair, I stepped out of the shower and realised I had forgotten to bring a large towel into the bathroom; walking out into the hallway and through the back bedroom to the airing cupboard, it hit me that the ringing had stopped. "Good", I told the empty air, "send a text." I was doing that more often now, talking aloud to myself in an empty house. Through the open bathroom window I could hear small birds chirping and noisier Magpies having an altercation. The sky was bright again. Rain stopped. I made a turban from a hand towel for my hair. I dried myself off, dressed in clean clothes, went downstairs to make a cup of tea and sit in front of the living flame gas fire soon to become obsolete in the new wave of green energy rules. Looking out at my garden, I admired my handiwork. With the dead foliage gone I could appreciate the late blooming roses, the flame red of the Begonias, the Fuchsia. I flicked through a hundred or so channels on the TV looking for an Agatha Christie where I'd forgotten who done it, or what they'd done, or who they were. Life was like that these days. Ding Dong, the doorbell sounded. Ding Dong again, two sounds. Ding Dong again, two tones. The man with the parcel was standing in the porch, the parcel on the floor, the little screen out for me to sign to let next door know he'd left the parcel with me. There seemed to be some sort of unwritten rule that old folk were good for leaving parcels with. One woman, if her babysitter was late, would leave her baby with whichever old neighbour was out of bed and would open the door to her until the sitter showed up, exclaiming loudly to the street that she had a job to go to as if the rest of us hadn't been there, done that, etcetera. There were also mutterings about old people owning houses, houses that were cheap when they bought them, and that they were

living too long causing the housing shortage. Parcel man seemed impatient, he had work to do. I signed the screen and he explained it would print out a piece of paper that he would put through next door's letter box to let them know who was minding their merchandise when I suddenly remembered, my door bell goes Ding Dong, so what was that strange shrill ringing sound about?

Flora Small

A Christmas Ghost Story

The snow instantly coated her eyelashes as she stepped out of her door into the freezing storm outside; knowing this was a really bad idea, especially in these conditions, which had started unexpectedly in the early hours of yesterday morning, and was definitely going to get worse by the looks of it already. But hell, that was why she had to, had to go and check on Pops wasn't it, she argued with herself. If she hadn't had to skip seeing him yesterday, with this bloody sneaky snow storm, she wouldn't have been so very concerned.

What if he'd missed taking his medications again? Not eaten or was laying injured on his doorstep, hand reaching out pleading for help as he was gradually frozen to death!

Shit, shit, shit she thought, turning away from her door and facing this onslaught, she took her first step out into the hard packed snow. She felt that horrid squeak, like nails on a blackboard, go through her plastic wellies making her cringe. Nearly blinded by the northerly wind and heavy snowfall, she quickly blinked trying to clear her vision and pulling her hood down over her woolly hat and eyes, looking down she braced herself against this onslaught already chilled to the bone despite her sensible Mount Everest snow gear.

All she could sporadically see through the blanket of thick falling snow was whiteness and the odd flash of her bright pink wellies.

Left, right, left right, it was slow going across her field in this. She had to get a move on before she froze to death, never mind pops!

After trying to open the large gate against the snows drifting which had frozen overnight, she gave up and opted to scramble over it to save time.

One pink welly got caught on top of the gate, tripping her, face down into the packed snow, which filled her nostrils causing instant panic. Turning herself quickly over and coughing she got turned around as she brushed herself off as best she could; before beginning what was usually just a quick 10 minute walk down the road, now a full on mission.

No way was she turning back, she thought stubbornly, as she begins the hard slog, slowly trudging down a road she'd know known all her life, but never in weather like this, until recently, with the climate changing.

Only ten, fifteen minutes had passed but with her burning thighs, aching calves and frozen feet it felt more like an hour. It was getting much worse, but she couldn't think about that now, she'd gone too far to turn back she thought; just as her next step took her into fresh air, falling, she cracked her head on something solid, saw stars and it all went black.

Consciousness returned with her brain screaming 'Wake up!'

Turning herself sideways, and brushing the snow from her face, wincing as her hand touched the egg rising on her forehead, realising she must have strayed off the

roadway, into the ditch and come a cropper. She slowly got herself up, not feeling quite right and very light headed she scrambled her way back up the embankment, brushing off the light covering of snow as best she could, turning left and determined she continued on her way.

Funny how she felt lighter, the snow hitting her face no bother now, she felt warmer too. A smile touched her lips, her thighs and calves had stopped protesting to. Don't stop, a small voice whispered, then Hypothermia it screamed. Her whole body jolted at this, realising she had stopped, lifting her bowed head, she faced forwards, Pops place can't be much further she thought, dragging one leg then the other out of the deep snow; first left then right, got to keep going or die was her next thought. Had hours or minutes passed? Times irrelevant, just keep going, keep on going. Was that a pinprick of light in the distance? Or a trick of the eye? Shaking her head and looking again, yes, it was still there, occasionally blotted out by the falling snow but a constant, there, in her sight she headed towards it, slightly quickening her step, still determined to get to Pops, to help him and also to save herself now? Her thought continued.

And there she was, on Pops doorstep, with much relief she opened his door and stepped into a very cosy warmth of orange light coming from the main fireplace, and there was Pops, sitting in his favourite armchair, placed in front.

Peering around Pops smiled at her briefly, before a look of sadness touched his eyes and mouth.

Slightly confused, stepping forward as her Pops raised himself from his chair, he walked towards her arms outstretched, oh my dearest, what have you done? He asked, as she herself reached for him, realising she could see the fire through his ghostly figure. His mortal body still fixed to the armchair.

A single tear fell down her cheek as she stepped towards him and they hugged each other, and in a flurry of sparkling snow dust blown in through the open front door they both disappeared.

Question: when/where did she die?

Julia Price

Never in Norway

Darkness seeks me
frantic movements half shadows
fill me with dread
a curtain descending
the cost of someone else's light

Eyelids - gatekeepers
light and shadow
ponder, dream, wander
quiet in us all

see the stars!

Redbrick Collective