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# Islands into a Continent

Lesley Saunders

Poet in conference

*All Together Better Health III*

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## **Contents**

**Introduction: Poetry in Conference**

**'Conference'**

**Found Poem**

**The Space Between a Woman's Hands**

**The Speakers**

**Put Yourself in My Shoes**

**Nil by Mouth**

**One of Those Evenings**

**Everything**

**Five Principles of Quality in Narratives of Action Research**

- i. The principle of historical continuity**
- ii. The principle of reflexivity**
- iii. The principle of dialectics**
- iv. The principle of workability**
- v. The principle of evocativeness**

**The Patient**

## Introduction: Poetry in Conference

Halfway through the conference, All Together Better Health 2006, it struck me that there's a particular challenge in playing the role of a poet in an environment where everyone is already dealing in words – the currency is fully and essentially language, its many faces and forms: technical, specialist, propositional, evidential, theoretical, of course; often and unashamedly emotive-experiential; and even fictional-impressionistic-artistic. (Some of the visual images that were spontaneously created through group-work are reproduced in this booklet.)

Typically, the poet's task is to give a voice to what has been silenced or to put words around what is intrinsically wordless. Not here, where presenters and delegates alike were so eloquent and articulate about the nuances of human nature and experience. Nor, perhaps unlike in longer residencies, was there much time for reflecting on all this – just the relative quiet of the hotel bedroom in the small hours.

I'd tried to anticipate (in a paper I wrote before the conference happened) some of the possible challenges I thought might lie in store, including the worry that the buzz of ideas, issues and people might occupy 'the front of my brain' to such a degree that I'd find it hard to feel a way back into the creative silence in which poetry is born. I was indeed enthralled by every one of the sessions I attended; and I realised that the point of my being there was to bear witness to this wealth of insights and interactions, to be right there in the thick of it. (Including the usual stuff about never quite getting to the right place at the right time, hurtling up and down flights of stairs between a tucked-away seminar room at the top of one campus building and the main lecture theatre five minutes away, with the conference brick of words bumping like a small table in one's bag; being mesmerised by the glittering wavy reflections of our to-ing and fro-ing selves in the vast glass-walled complex of Imperial College; and enjoying the instant, transient, gratifying companionship over take-away sandwiches with people from Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, USA, Sweden, and so many other countries.) I did, though, make an effort to pull myself away for a couple of hours on the last day – to an unoccupied laboratory at the top of the Electrical Engineering building – in order to produce at least one or two pieces of work-in-progress to read at the close of conference.

So the poems that were written then and in the fortnight following are a personal response to an inspiring and provocative occasion, and I am deeply grateful to the conference organisers – especially Marilyn Hammick – for inviting me, and to the presenters and workshop-leaders for letting me feed off their ideas.

Not surprisingly, Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine – the venue for the conference – makes its presence felt from time to time; and even the skies and fields of Malmesbury (a small market town in the west of England), where several of these poems were completed, make a brief appearance.

## **'Conference'**

An assemblage or bringing together  
rivers into rain  
islands into a continent

all your families shining  
and flattened for transit

all your ideas packed  
snazzy as new shirts

all your many sailings  
into this one bottle

this makeshift village  
sprouting under glass

in the palace's plexus  
in its atria and cells

for the annual gabfest  
confab, causerie

a show of hands  
like birds or chalices

many flights of fancy  
many signs of the times

and where there was nothingness  
suddenly are terraces of citations

spreading espaliers of dialectic  
brainfood for the lean times ahead

and around the water-cooler  
exquisite business cards

are swapped like beads or tobacco  
pow-wow parley palaver

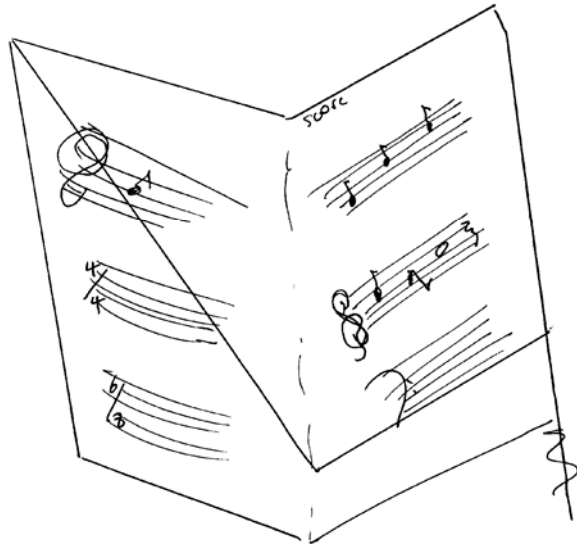
tittle-tattle tete-a-tete  
making a song and dance of it

rivers into rain  
islands into a continent  
an assembly, a bringing together.

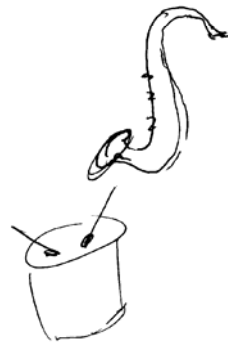
Rosemin Kassam

Maia Sarria Aqreha Delis

Magrest Sillo

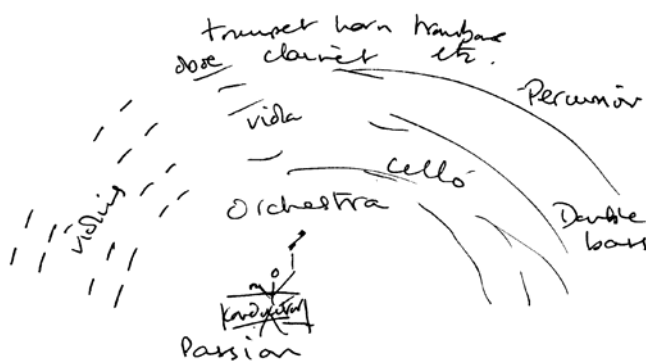


p ppp  
f ff



Jazz  
Pop  
classical

Harmony  
Synthesis  
Timing  
Tone  
pitch  
synergy



Communicate  
relationships  
Personal  
unique

## Found Poem

my story:

they said it couldn't be done,  
the concept of total pain:  
survivors of violence,  
them against us,  
walking in the dark on an unlit road  
into the midst of it:  
all hazards emergency preparedness

metamorphosis of snakes and ladders,  
the theory of boundaries –  
talking the talk  
when drowning isn't an option:  
where is the null hypothesis?  
rhetoric or reality?  
they said it couldn't be done

opportunity knocks:  
guide dogs for the blind,  
finding a solution to shifting sands,  
thinking outside the medicine cabinet;  
pride without prejudice,  
no pain, no gain,  
a rainbow of desires

weaving a common thread,  
walking the walk,  
the amazing non-race,  
being at the other end:

my story...

(With thanks to the programme organisers, the presenters, workshop leaders,  
poster-makers and delegates)

## **The Space Between a Woman's Hands**

'and in one place the cast of the unfinished space  
between a woman's hands is clearly visible'

from the poem *City*, Jane Draycott, *Tideway*

You place your hands a sentence-length apart  
at the level of your heart, an unfinished space  
like the wait for the first words of the next story

the hot vexed push of a newborn's head  
against your practised memory

or like the gap through which a grown man –  
his body having taken a vow of silence  
despite himself – might slip as if stepping

off a ledge, the world rushing past his ears  
his edges blurred, all his colours running

as if there's no-one there to catch  
his meanings, hold them level with her heart.

(With thanks to Monica Clarke, who gave the workshop on *Communication support  
for those who cannot access words*)

## **The Speakers**

They have come here  
like actors or surgeons to lay bare  
the interior of things

having rehearsed in private  
having adjusted their spectacles  
having selected their instruments and phrases

these small precise dividers and braces;  
afterwards with steady hands stitching torn edges  
putting one iota with another a pulse-beat at a time

the breath of fragility with the bones of survival  
the art of fight with the science of flight  
the gracefulness of eloquence with the grace of reticence

and so on till we've come to our senses  
our make-believe, misplaced identities.

(With thanks to Melissa McCullough and David Grant, who led the interactive drama-based workshop, and their group of drama students from Queen's University Belfast)

## **Put Yourself in My Shoes**

Like licking your knife or not washing your hands  
bad would happen if you wore another person's shoes

even your best friend's, even your own mother's  
who'd long lost her dances in the far dark of the wardrobe

as if your feet, feeling their way into these other heels' hollows,  
would suddenly know and from then on be unable to forget

the weight of a separate body pressing down on itself,  
how in a while it might lean over backwards and fall

for someone unsuitable, someone too light on his feet;  
how it would imprint all the unsaid things as tread, furrow, frown;

how, later still, like the woman with too many offspring,  
it would cram itself into this terse house, grounded.

## **Nil by Mouth**

This must be Delphi  
the high walls  
and famished corridors,

hurrying footsteps,  
that clean keen smell  
of light-headed afternoons

and the ritual instruction  
to keep all ways and gates  
clear for the passage

of something unrequitable  
waving its candlestick arms  
like an improvised sibyl

full of gabble and halitosis,  
visionary, intending no harm.

' All voices are equal'



Heidi Keightley  
Kinda Sawchenko.  
Eileen Huish.  
Prof. Richard Vincent.

## **One of Those Evenings**

We were sitting round the table – candlelight, a bottle or two of wine, civilised conversation – when a terrible question entered my head.

Have you ever, I said, seen a child so deeply damaged, in whom you truly have not been able to discern its humanity? He looked at me, the white-haired inspector of education, over his glasses and thought for a while.

(We were visitors, guests of a school for pupils with severe autistic spectrum disorders, a school open all year round for parents as well as for their children, a school internationally renowned for its belief and determination that all children can learn, through play, through song and dance, through patience and trust, through just saying their name, over and over.)

No, he said, no, I never have. In my experience, there is always a spark of the individual soul to be glimpsed, however hopeless or difficult the situation may seem. But in any case, he added, it takes the efforts of a whole team of people – all of them, with their different, plural perspectives and expertise – to see the whole child, whole.

We were sitting round the table, candlelight, a bottle or two of wine – I wasn't expecting such civilised conversation...

## Everything

'This man is dying not because of something that has happened to him but because of everything that has happened to him.' Michael Wood, *At the Movies*

'Aun aprendo [I am still learning]' Francisco Goya, aged 81

write the story backwards  
just as you found or invented him:

how the pain had become a parody of agony  
how the white noise of his own voice  
had wound itself like a sheet round his mind

how the thin wafer of medicine, of strangers' kindness  
had grown too hard to swallow, how his own life  
had turned into an impossible act to follow

you could mention how his best friend told everyone in the street  
about this deaf, clumsy, weak old man he'd met  
that his notes add he was suffering from spasms of the bladder

hardening of the bowels, an unpardonable tumour  
that his eyes had started playing tricks on him  
that even before his stroke he walked with sticks

you could say – who's to argue? – he'd had ten more years  
of borrowed hours, squeezing himself a breath at a time  
through the narrowest of cracks, only rarely looking back

but do not neglect to tell us how he went on painting  
pushing crayons when a brush wouldn't obey or stay in his hands,  
that his patrons were all ill or abroad, that his only son was a lush  
that his death is not a solution to any of our apprehensions

and how then he teased with dabs and purls of carbon-black  
on ivory squares, for all the world like a man searching  
in his shirt for fleas, furious and alive, furious  
but alive, a lunatic in a sack, a grinning buddha swinging through the air

at last how the flat line of the horizon slewed straight at him  
flew him out of everyone's reach and way past anyone's imagining.

(With thanks to Pippa Hall and Maryse Bouvette, University of Ottawa, whose workshop *The concept of total pain and its benefit to interprofessional health sciences education* I attended)

'We do need some conceptual tools to grasp the problem of quality of narratives, but tools different from the traditional concepts of validity and reliability, which harbour markedly positivistic connotations. In this paper, we propose five principles for judging the quality of action research from a narrative point of view: historical continuity, reflexivity, dialectics, workability, evocativeness...' Hannu L. T. Heikkinen et al., *'On the problem of quality in narratives of action research'*.

## **Five Principles of Quality in Narratives of Action Research**

### *1. The principle of historical continuity*

this is the story of a glove left on top of a wall  
a small faded navy woollen glove as it happens  
though yesterday or on someone else's gatepost  
I noticed it was red and had grown several pom-poms  
and I thought it was remarkable how people

must live in the hope that the owner will stop dead,  
put a bare hand to her head and turn on her heel  
postponing the destiny for which she (or of course he,  
for gloves can be sexless, though presumably not  
in the case of the black fishnet mitten) was previously bound;

how they must picture the frowning boyfriend or father  
checking his watch, wondering when to call the police  
and cursing the fact that the match has already started;  
they can see the ex-glove-owner retracing her steps  
a bit out of breath and pink with embarrassment

although the joggers panting past the opposite way, the way  
she was going herself only ten minutes since, are in no state  
to cast judgement, and besides the sky has that glorious tinge  
of flamingo, the windows are all gazing west, foreheads burning,  
a swarm of starlings is turning itself into a tulip-tree for the night

and a glove on a wall holds out its palm for the conjectural light  
falling from stars which it will save until someone comes  
to reclaim it and it made me think how remarkable it was  
that people these days would take so much care over a glove.

2. *The principle of reflexivity*

you know when  
you

when you feel

when the words

when the words  
won't

when they  
somehow

in your throat

when you think  
no-one will

no-one could

no-one will catch  
your

no-one will catch  
you

no-one

hold you

will  
hold you

could  
they?

3. *The principle of dialectics*

So, as he said, the key to it all  
is the rhythm, the walking uphill,  
the steps in the wall, the knock  
in the blood, the knocking on wood  
which is the pumping of sap, the sob  
in the heart or sump of the forest  
unlocking the roots, releasing the green

And, as he said, it is also a matter of flow  
how we monitor the breathing by our own mornings  
and evenings and as well when it's in danger of stopping  
so we can work to insert a line or whole stanza of air  
like a prayer for mercy, the psalms of statin and aspirin  
and listening hear the rivers murmuring again to themselves  
and watching see the look of someone coming round from a dream

Then, as he said, there is the idea of butterfly  
starting who knows what fires with the beat of its wings merely  
while it flies holding the gaze of a naturalist or nation entirely  
in its chrysalis or bud singing out to be free wholly  
when it dies or its time has come moving people to tears clearly  
as it rests between forms biding its iridescence solely  
when it spreads out its true colours covering the darkness utterly.

(With thanks to Alan Bleakley, of the Peninsula Medical School, England, who led  
a workshop on improving patient safety through the study of teamwork in the  
operating theatre)

4. *The principle of workability*

Imperial College, London

at first it was the metals and mines  
shouldering themselves out of the ground  
shovelling visible pieces of time  
recollected from yesterday's forests and  
pressed between pages of rock  
or assembled from burnt-out lift-shafts  
of decommissioned volcanoes  
after the rain had stopped

then the city went electric  
vertical take-off into its future  
at the click of a trillion switches  
ambition not dreams  
portrait not landscape  
skylark not wren  
the resolute face of the clock  
staring out through its fingers  
at the bird's-eye view  
from the top of the tower  
that stands up like a wire  
out of the motherboard  
and the river from here  
has the look of a fuse  
or a current which if followed  
to its logical conclusion  
could end in a deluge  
or frozen in horror  
in time or tomorrow

and now in a box  
is a code or a key  
a mock-up, a simile  
an algorithm or fluxion  
a theory, a crux  
the axis or pole of the soul  
going round on itself  
the notion of motion  
a reckoning or beckoning  
as of gravity or levity  
Schroedinger's cat, a mouse  
and a mat, Heisenberg's  
hang-up, this and/or that  
a flummox, a perplex  
a quantum or leap  
before looking  
cornering blind  
from the quark to a dark star  
from the red to the blue  
from the brain to the mind  
from the me to the you.

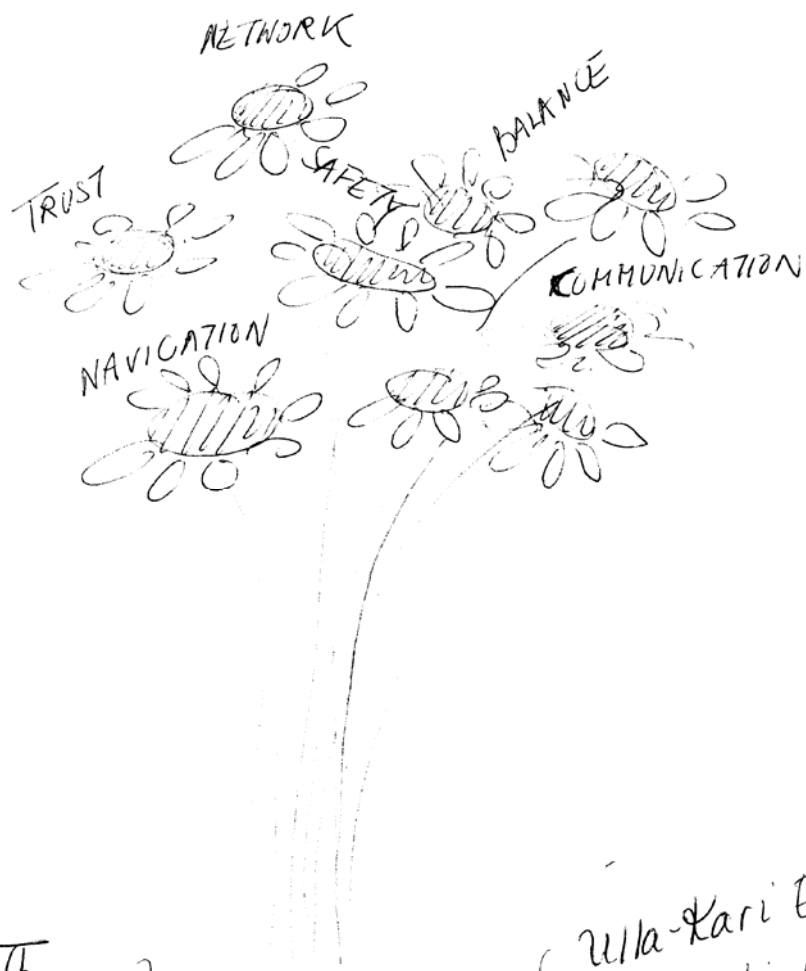
5. *The principle of evocativeness*

like a infant's head  
held up to the sun  
translucent  
as a grain of rice

like the turning of a page  
caused by the terrifying draught  
of a child in his headlong rush  
through his parents' lives

like china dishes the dead have touched  
that season they wore their flesh  
nonchalantly as sleeves,  
leaving cups hanging by one finger  
leaving bowls to fill up with light

like  
a hedge  
gathering  
one more  
species  
to itself  
a wort  
a moth  
a finch  
a bine  
in its own  
time  
at its own  
pace  
no quicker  
or slower  
than once  
in every  
one hundred  
years  
but the fields  
are in  
no hurry  
and the sky  
is just  
passing  
by.



Paul Thomas }  
 Pan Jackson } uk

Sweden { Ulla-Kari Edberg  
 Svanne Lindequist  
 Susanna Andersson



Also by Lesley Saunders

Glancing Fires: An Investigation into Women's Creativity (editor)  
*Women's Press, 1987*

The Dark Larder                      designed and illustrated by Peter Hay  
*Corridor Press, 1997*

Christina the Astonishing with Jane Draycott; illustrated by Peter Hay  
*Two Rivers Press, 1998*

On flying, writing poetry and doing educational research  
*British Educational Research Journal, 29, 2, 175–187 (2003).*

'Something made in language': the poet's gift?  
*Management Decision, 44, 4 (forthcoming).*