

## A Walk on the Oxford Poem Road

(a Haibun read at the *Sketches from the Poem Road* Closing Celebration,  
in the Glass Tank, OBU, Friday 15 July 2016)



(Isao rang a bell to signal changes in direction)

Chris: Look! early summer is out stretching its legs in the sunshine. The wind is light and warm today. And in the Glass Tank gallery, Isao's paper wind is blowing over the slates. We are 7 friendly writers and poets, including an artist, all eager to be out there in the wind and sunshine, walking like a group of humble Basho's in our paper coats.

Wendy: *Take my hands, walk with me  
for part of our journey  
listen for the bird calling, notice one star.*

Chris: Isao, tell us about the Road...

Isao: The Road is made of Poems you love. You want to see where they started, the place or the poet who started them.

Chris: I'm already thinking of Shelley's memorial in University College!

Robert: *O wild West Wind...wild spirit, which art moving everywhere...*

Dorothy: look at the pillars of the Oxford Brookes colonnade, new but with a patina of rust: we like the beauty of old age so much, we make the new look old!

Chris: look at the bicycles locked under the roof garden, longing to escape!

Dorothy: we thread our way to South Park, where there's the smell of warm, rain-fed grass. A brown puddle.

Inigo: the first part of a journey is to get to the point that it feels like the beginning of the journey

Robert: in spite of ourselves, we gasp at the towery city, branchy in between cranes, tipped into this basin, river-rounded honey pot. In spite of ourselves, we believe, if we stand here long enough, clever words will rise, and rise...

Inigo: Cranes litter the skyline  
As though they are re-building  
Buildings centuries old.

Dorothy: Huge craneflies  
wave their feelers over the city,  
tasting the air.

It feels so good to be here, in the here and now. I see a bench cut from a tree trunk, just a broad seat and a back. Another day I'll come back and sit on it, and remember our walk.



Wendy: Time does not allow me to dwell in the house where I was born. Home is where our language lies and for now it's in South Park and half buried in the earth is this paint brush, lying as though tired. It's given up its journey and is waiting to be found but I do not pick it up. I leave it to find itself for how else will we ever learn? Maybe it has painted each blade of summer grass for the earth smells sweet today.



Inigo: Walking down St Clement's, we think about names: Clement was an early pope, but was he 'merciful'? Dorothy means 'gift of god', and Robert is 'bright fame'. I chose my name when I was fourteen, thinking of 'Ignacio' (the fiery!), but when I looked it up, I found that it is Basque for 'my little love', which is quite different.

Wendy: My children call me *Wa*, the Japanese for happiness and peace. Today I meet for the first time Isao, whose name means *Medal*, so Medal and Happiness go together, walk side by side.

Dorothy: buses rumble past, their sides painted with starburst maps of all the places you can go in Oxford.

How fast do poems travel?  
Mine sits on a bus  
in a comfortable seat, stopping and starting.

Inigo: here is a small door with a small sign saying ‘Royal Microscopical Society’

Is it on purpose  
That your declaration of purpose  
Is hidden and hard to see?



Niall: Magdalen Bridge where students laugh and leap into the river.  
Shall I leap like a student too, or make a leap of thought into  
Zuleika Dobson? Like the Duke of Dorset whose ‘very mantle  
was aspersed’, who cried “Zuleika!” in a loud voice, then took a  
deep breath and, burying his face in his mantle, plunged!

Dorothy: A plaque by the rose maze, by the Botanic Garden.  
A Jewish cemetery lies underneath the maze, and a hidden path –  
Deadman’s Walk – leads from here to St Aldate’s. There’s so much  
that is hidden in Oxford, the tourist-thronged streets are only the  
top layer.

Robert: Dead Jews under this garden: we walk on foot, trunk, head, mouth,  
silent scream. In the centre of Oxford, they burnt the Protestant  
martyrs. Religious fundamentalism then and now!

We’ll light a candle  
You’ll light a fire  
We’ll burn a bonfire  
You’ll burn the world.

Niall: In the shade of yews and pines, we stop by a wide grey stone set  
into the earth. Like other points on our short journey, the stone acts  
as a gateway. We brush away the pebbles that obscure an  
inscription, and Oxford reluctantly reveals itself. This is the  
grounds of a medieval Jewish cemetery, 'a small section of  
wasteland' granted to the Jews of Oxford in place of an earlier plot  
which was 'appropriated' by the Hospital of St. John. But this new

cemetery was only used for 60 years before Edward I expelled all 2,000 Jews from England, citizens who were, as Colin Richmond writes, 'productive and contributive'.

Forced to migrate south,  
The Jews relinquish their dead.  
Small stones mark bodies,  
'May their memory be blessed'.

On Great Jewry Street  
I witness names and faces  
Melt away like salt  
Crusting on the silent tongue.



Wendy: We walk down...

Dorothy: or is it up?...

Wendy: ...the High Street, and stand all of us on an island in the middle of the road. A plaque for Mrs Cooper who made the recipe that made her husband Frank so famous!

Robert: Streets of marmalade,  
toasted walls dripping honey  
and butter-edged clouds.

Wendy: I face a shop called 'Simply Sewing' and think of Basho sewing up his trousers before he set out on the Narrow Road. My clothes are properly sewn for the moment. In Hebrew culture when someone dies loved ones rent their clothes to mark wounds that will never heal. Can 'Simply Sewing' heal those wounds?



Isao: now we turn into Queen's Lane and it is full of bicycles!  
Basho would have loved a bicycle...

Chris: ...but he might have fallen off when he saw an ancient pine tree because it was so old and gnarled and beautiful it took his breath away!

Dorothy: An upright bicycle  
whizzes past, but these ones slump  
in a drunken stupor.

Chris: pine trees reminded Basho of his favourite poet of the past, called Saigyo. Bicycles always make me think of Michael Donaghy:  
*The machinery of grace is always simple*

Robert: **The bicycle of  
forgetfulness –behind me  
waving long good-byes.**

Inigo: Look! a red kite wheels past the tower. I shout to point it out, but it is gone in a second, and only Isao and I see it.

**A kite's broad circles  
cut short by my act  
of glancing up**

Niall: at the end of New College Lane, the keen-eyed walker is rewarded with a view of a roughly-hewn brown plaque on the house where Edmond Halley lived. Here Halley had his observatory and calculated the elliptical orbit of a comet and thus correctly predicted when it would next be seen - sixteen years after his death.

**The grief in these rooms  
Of the long-haired observer,  
Sure of his comet's return,  
Never to see it.**



Dorothy: Here we are in front of the Radcliffe Camera. A passage under the lawn connects it to the Bodleian. There are people working away beneath our feet. Where All Souls College stands was once a cherry orchard. So I recite Housman's 'Loveliest of trees, the cherry now'. I remember my father told me about the spring festival in Japan, when the cherry trees were in bloom. He said the most prized was the wild mountain cherry, and the best time to see it was in the morning sun, when the light caught the snow-white flowers fringed with crimson leaves.



Inigo: How fleeting everything is! Chris exclaims that we will be late for the Shelley memorial. So we don't commemorate the Oxford martyrs on Broad Street, or go to the interesting other places that

we'd planned to see, lest the Poem Walk just peters out and does not reach its destination.

Robert: *Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!*

Chris: Yes, we will sit down in the Meadows later. We will flop down on the grass with sighs of relief! Isao will serve us green tea and *mochi* rice-cakes dusted with green tea powder, just like Dorothy's great-grandmother made for the spring festival.

Dorothy: My father said she would steam a special kind of large-grained rice and pound it with a wooden pestle and make it into balls; then she would fill them with a paste of red beans boiled with sugar. The pounded rice had a herb added to it, to colour it green: my father looked its name up in a dictionary and said it was what we call 'mugwort'.

Wendy: **Green tea and rice-cakes  
on the grass    the start of  
another journey**

Chris: You are making me hungry, Wendy! But here is the door of Univ and the porter is waving us towards the Shelley Memorial.

Niall: *O wild West Wind...wild spirit, which art moving everywhere....!*

Robert: It's a cold and surprisingly spacious shrine for a drowned white boy, his show-off body and rumpled curls – yet he has a radiator (painted in the same dark mushroom paint as the walls) and the warm adoring gasps of the pilgrims, who probably never read a word of what he wrote.

Inigo: There's an argument in the group: is this Memorial moving or awful? Would Shelley have liked it? He liked his Nature to be terrifying, irrational, awe inspiring. But this is solemn, unblemished, sleepy. There is a gap between the horror of his death and the white elegance of this statue.

Chris: To me, Shelley looks exhausted, as if he's been flattened by the wild west wind! For me, it's like he's been knocked out by the poem he wrote. He tried to lock up the words in rhymes and

tercets, but they've blown him over. That's the power of his poem, it's like the wind itself.

Inigo: When we read poems before on this Walk, we took it in turns. But now let's read an extract from Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* in unison. We might be halting at first, but then it will feel **incantatory!**

***from Ode to the West Wind, by Percy Bysshe Shelley***

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

...

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh hear!

...

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

