



Relating to family and friends (Part 1)

Five of these compositions express a profound love and respect for close family, while the odd one out (*'How would you feel'*), reflects something akin to the opposite: a dislike for the situation I found myself in. These are special poems, full of feeling, penned on the spur and motivated by those inner most thoughts that all of us are prone to encounter from time to time.

We begin with two poems, written many years apart - and many miles apart also - but both telling of a very special love for my children and the wonder that is life itself.

A child is born

***A child has emerged
The world to view,
A joy to behold,
That shared is ten-fold.***

***Mother and foetus have parted,
And with parting has come
A wondrous admiration
Immersed in incomprehension.***

***For who are we to know
This life and all it holds,
When our own boasts of invention
Are minutely insignificant
Beside this beauty that is life.***

***All the money,
All the machines,
All else is lost,
Beside this creation
That is joy,
That is peace,
That is love.***

***A child is born
And that is hope itself.***

For Kate Louise
Adelaide, 12.08.1986

A child is born (above) This early composition came into my thoughts as I watched the birth of my firstborn daughter, Kate, in Australia. I guess that many people are affected in a similar way: to see a child born can engender incredible feelings of awe, unlike anything else. And in this case those terms 'incredible' and 'awe' are used literally, not as the throw-away words they tend to be. Judged in comparison to that which humans strive to achieve the miracle of birth is so much more significant and sends a message of hope to the world.

Suddenly it was Spring!

*Way up beyond the town,
Far from the cobbled streets,
A moment in time to hold.*

*We sat there, Alice and I,
Looking down on the ochre rooves,
Breathing the newborn air.
Released from the tourist throng
It seemed like a new world on view,
In the late afternoon sun.*

*Beneath the majestic rocca
We scanned the Umbrian plain,
Spread out from Assisi town.
I chewed on green clover leaves,
Alice picked flowers and seeds
To throw on her dozing dad.*

*The clock on the quarter hour,
The bird song from everywhere:
Suddenly, it was Spring!*

Assisi, Umbria, Italy
April 4th, 2004

I recall looking out across the Umbrian plain, the mood of the moment intensified by the fact that we had just escaped from a long English winter. It was wonderful to lie back on the uncut lawn, under a cotton wool sky, listening to birds chirping in the background. As I dozed, the regular chime from the Assisi town clock became a perfect accompaniment. ***Suddenly it was Spring!***

The innocence of childhood. What a joy it is to be with children. Their company allows one to ride on a swing, make sandcastles on the beach, and lie on the grass in the afternoon sun: acts that often disappear with the guilt of adulthood.

My Brother. No Less!

*In the end it came so easily,
Connecting the threads after fifty-six years.
Just dropped from the sky,
As I had done on that very same day,
Home from India.*

*The article read 'Stranger on a Train',
As we had been strangers in the same land.
Half-brothers no less,
Separated by the Victorian ethics
Of a bygone era.*

*It was an intriguing piece of journalism
That re-worked the memories of post-war times,
In a line of travel,
Spearing out from Cyprus, through Istanbul
And back to England.*

*But it wasn't the story that caught my eye,
It was the name and detailed identity card.
And amazingly too,
A map that retraced my airborne journey
Back from India.*

*So there it was: my brother's name,
Known to me for some twenty-odd years.
Handed out on a plate
Or national newspaper to be more precise,
But brother, no less.*

*A few phone calls later and I
Was speaking to this female voice that said
"Yes, I know him quite well".
Turned out to be a somewhat frivolous line
For her partner in life.*

*And then he called, and we met
In a pub across from The Common,
Over beer and cigarettes.
Filling the gaps in those fifty-six years:
One long gap in truth.*

***Something that seemed so far out of reach
Was all of a sudden so real and alive.
Feels almost surreal at times,
Just showing how life can leap forward
To inhabit the unknown.***

London, 30.08.2003

My brother. No less! tells the miraculous - and for me very special - story of finding my half-brother after many long years of not knowing each other. I had been orphaned within a loving family, a claim to fame perhaps not so unusual in continuing Victorian times. But I knew from the 1980s that my late father (whom I never met) had a son, about nine years my senior. I tried for some time to find him but was unsuccessful.

Twenty years later, returning on a night-time flight from India, I noticed the path the plane took, over cities such as Istanbul, Frankfurt, and Paris. At home the next morning, I was shown an article in *The Weekend Independent*. The piece included a map with a track across Europe, similar to my journey the night before. At the top was the writer's name and just below that an old identity card: he had been de-mobbed in Cyprus, before travelling overland to Britain. The article was laid out in the form of a clear signpost, that this was my brother.

The next week in London, after making contact through the newspaper, we met in a pub near Clapham Common. Later that day - a little past tipsy - he took me home to meet his wife, who it transpired was the lady I had spoken to earlier in the day at *The Independent*. I still marvel at the similarity of those pathways across Europe ... more than forty years apart. Lucky I guess, that I subscribed to *The Independent*.

How would you feel?

***My life stretches back for fifty-plus years,
To the time when I stood centre-front
Of a large family gathering,
Assembled to toast
The marriage of my erstwhile mum.***

***She'd fallen in love with a tall Aussie guy
Who was to whisk her away from the throng,
And leave me believing
My mother to be,
The grand-mum who stood in her place.***

***Fast-forward twenty-three years:
I stared at the scrap of paper,
With its typewritten words
And hand-written script
On dotted black lines.
Such a small piece of paper,
To hold the truth of my life.***

***How would you feel?
Twenty-six years old
And able to learn the truth
That most people know
When they begin to walk!***

***How would you feel?
Knowing you've been told
A pack of lies for years,
Only to protect
Your mother from her sin!***

***How would you feel?
You just don't fit the mold,
Relations turned upside down,
And history's confined
To only half the truth!***

Cheltenham, 2005

How would you feel? is not such a happy poem; it conveys feelings of bitterness towards my mother and her family that welled up in the 1970s, after finding out the true facts of my own birth (more than 20 years earlier). The truth came to me in the form of an extract from my birth certificate sent (on request) from London by the English authority that oversees such things.

After a few years of resentment, my dark moods subsided, only to re-surface after unearthing my half-brother in 2003 (see *My Brother. No Less!* above). This poem came a couple of years after that, showing quite clearly the degree of animosity that lingered on. It was the deceit which hurt the most: by the people who had gained my most intimate trust. And for me, like all others who don't know all the details of their biological parents, a very practical aspect emerges related to inadequate knowledge of medical history and other aspects which might impact on later life.

Both my mother and my half-brother have died since the two poems above were written. Looking back on it all, I now feel we don't have time to dwell on such minutia of situation in our relatively short time on Earth. I should have been more forthright with my mother and could have held my brother closer, for the short time we were together.

My Little Angel

The planning for her arrival

Took more than two years:

Meticulous in detail,

Complex in its practice.

It was decided by decree

She would be called 'Malaika',

Or 'Angel', as I was told.

The 'Angel' came to Earth

On her sixth attempt!

A small white package,

In swaddling clothes.

A tiny cappuccino baby,

Born into African hands.

Her future and fate to mold.

She was my little angel

For less than twenty months.

I delighted in having

Time to spend with her.

A small bundle of energy

Who walked, talked and sang:

A beauty to have and to hold.

I can only really hope

That we can stay in touch:

This tiny little angel

And her vintage old man.

For I wish to help her grow

Into a good and valued soul,

Before flying away from the fold.

Kenya 2018

The name *Malaika*, in Kiswahili, means angel. This beautiful, perfectly formed little girl reflects something of her African heritage: her lightly tanned skin and the fact that she is now looked after mostly by her single *Mama*. Our *cappuccino* baby was born after a long struggle, into a loving household; but before long, her *mzungu* (white) *Papa* had been asked to leave. He does his best to maintain the bond, as much as he is able to. Who flies away from the fold first – her for a more worldly life, or him for the heavens – time will only tell.

Travels in Tandem

*Some twenty-odd years have passed us both by,
Sunsets galore sliding into the sea,
Since we lay on the grass above Assisi town:
My young daughter Alice, and I.
She has grown taller while I've become older,
But the same intimate link still remains,
That underpins travel to faraway sites,
A connection on which we rely.*

*We started the trend under January skies;
A Venetian escape in the cold.
Yet was it an omen to sit by that bridge,
And drink wine under glorious sun?
The wonders of Paris were also embraced
By those early travelling thrills,
Which had the effect of increasing our thirst
For escapes laced with tandem fun.*

*The meetings moved on to the love of our lives,
Namely India, and all that it holds;
With the custom and colour of Rajasthan lands,
And Agra brought to life by two boys.
Then over the years this India became
Our adored home away from our home,
With Mumbai the gateway to enter through,
And all those Mumbaiker joys.*

*Other gems were selected to re-quench our thirst
And keep our encounters on track;
First Padova: not far from our first meeting place;
And an encounter with Aperol Spritz!
Bringing all this together it then had to be
A date by the Bosphorus bridge.
EU and Asia connecting as one,
Istanbul was just the right fit.*

***In recent times it's been Europe twice more,
Both near Mediterranean shores;
Lecce in Puglia and Avignon, Provence:
Each walled and beguiling enclaves.
We wandered them both as in earlier times,
Trying to capture the inbuilt mood,
And attempting to offset the general stance
Of tourism, appearing in waves.***

***So where will we head when twenty-23 comes around?
There's talk of us going further still;
Reaching out to East Asia and on to Australia,
Once again, our excitement mounts.
But it's safe to say that wherever we meet
We'll enjoy the experience anew;
For no matter the place that fills the bill,
It's travels in tandem that counts.***

Lecce, Italy, May 2022

This poem is to some extent self-explanatory and follows on from an earlier poem in this section - ***Suddenly it was Spring*** (2004) – which related the first of many experiences together, with my daughter Alice. Since then, over almost two decades, we have met on numerous occasions, to try to get to know new places and peoples together; and there have been many: Venice, Padova and Lecce in Italy, Paris and Avignon in France, plus destinations in India to the North and South, with Istanbul in 2019 perhaps the place which connected the strands.

The third and fifth verses may need some clarification. The reference to two boys in the second recounts a wonderful connection with two local boys – Vicky and Shan – who joined us (by chance) for five days, to lead us through an enlightened experience of the Taj Mahal and Agra. The end-phrase *Mumbaiker joys* denotes a close connection to Mumbai, the place and close friends who live there (which began for me in 1985). In the fifth, the end-phrase – *Of tourism, appearing in waves* – relates to the many tourist groups following behind their leader, we would see (and shy away from) during those glorious Spring days in Lecce.