



GEOFFREY WINCH

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Monday Writer

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Geoffrey Winch, Monday Writer, 14 September 2020

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About Geoffrey Winch

Geoffrey Winch is a retired highway engineer living in Felpham, West Sussex. He is a member of several local poetry groups and reads regularly at the Chichester Open Mic. His poetry has been published mainly in the UK, US and online, almost one thousand poems all in all. He occasionally devises and leads poetry workshops for small groups, and has published six collections, his latest being [*Velocities and Drifts of Winds*](#). In 2011 he was awarded the accolade of 'The UK's Best Small Press Poet' by *Purple Patch* magazine.

The Monday Writer Interview

GEOFFREY WINCH

in conversation with Nnorom Azuonye

The introduction of you on the Dempsey and Windle website says your poetry 'has appeared regularly in journals and anthologies in the UK, US and online' since 1992. When did you start writing?

I began writing at a very young age – not poetry though – writing compositions and essays at both junior and senior schools I enjoyed from the start, I even won a couple of junior prizes for compositions I wrote for competitions in the local press.

I was encouraged by my mother mainly – I was brought up in Reading, Berkshire, where our family regularly attended the local Methodist Church (Whitley Hall). My father was the church organist and my mother wrote and produced Nativity and Easter plays – that always impressed me.

After marrying Janet, who I met at the church youth club, we moved away for work, firstly to Hampshire and then Warwickshire, and we lost touch with the church for many years. I became more enamoured by the 1960s counterculture, especially the music scene. I had co-founded a rock band – The Cyclones – at our old youth club where we used to play the Shadows and Johnny and the Hurricanes numbers etc, but being a rather third-rate guitarist I had left after a couple of years (the band had more success after that!) – but the music of that era was important in my life. Often it still influences my poetry today. So, this brings me back to my development as a writer – having become disappointed with the counterculture's decline during the seventies I wrote a novel *West Abutment Mirror Images* which centred on that decline. However, I failed to find a publisher for it despite rewriting it during the 1980s. Nevertheless, I

still regarded it as something of an achievement – satisfying inasmuch that it taught me much about the actual discipline of sustained writing.

Do you remember the first poem you wrote and the first poem you published?

It was whilst writing the second version of my novel sometime in the 1980s that I began to dabble with the idea of free verse poetry, and used to write odd bits and pieces on scraps of paper which I would then slip into a file, never being sure as to what I could do with them. It then happened that Ian Walton with his Arrival Press/Poetry Now imprint was publishing Regional Anthologies and advertising in local presses for aspiring poets to submit work – so I sent in two of my renderings and he accepted one, titled ‘Sailing Away’, which he then published in his *Central Poets Anthology* in 1992. This appeared almost at the same time as I received what I decided would be my final rejection (from Faber and Faber) for my novel. Looking back now it might have been a lightbulb moment as from that point on I just concentrated my efforts on writing poetry. I took out a subscription for Ian’s *Poetry Now* magazine, and this suddenly opened up the whole and, for me, previously unexplored world of small press poetry magazines and journals.

During the 1980s Janet and I had re-joined the Methodist Church in Royal Leamington Spa where we were living, and throughout the 1990s much of my poetry was written specifically for the church magazine. But I also had poems accepted by Roger Elkin for *Envoi*, Nick Clarke for *Poetic Hours*, and others appeared in *Linkway*, *Inclement*, *Roundyhouse* and *Raw Edge* etc. so I felt satisfied that I was making progress in the small press poetry world as well.

What did you do before you began writing?

After leaving school my first job was as a cartographer working for the Planning Department at Reading County Borough Council, and subsequently as a draughtsman for the Highways Department at the same Authority. This was followed by two and a half years working for Hampshire CC as draughtsman on the M3 Motorway Design, and then after we moved to Warwickshire I worked briefly for Coventry City Council, then the County and District Councils, initially as a land surveyor then as a highway technician and engineer. Prior to taking early retirement in 2001 I had been made the Principal Development Control Highway Officer at WCC. Much of my work at that stage involved writing which I really enjoyed – being required to give evidence at numerous public inquiries as an expert witness, I needed to write many proofs of evidence; and also I project-managed and edited the then definitive County Council’s *Developers’ Guide to Highways and Transport*.

Why do you write poetry and what kind of poet are you?

This is a difficult question to answer because I just want to say “I don’t know!” but that’s not quite right. I also feel I ought to say “Why not? – poems are there to be written, and if I didn’t write the ones I do – who else would?” So the answer is, perhaps, within those responses somewhere – maybe it is some kind of compulsion: each blank page sets a challenge for me, and I simply have to respond.

I am the kind of poet who usually makes many notes before I begin the actual writing – but then not all come to fruition, and others can sit on a back-burner for months and sometimes years. On other occasions I just sit down and begin writing – it is intriguing to see what appears. Some poems I start off knowing what I want them to be about, but then they will turn out to be about something totally different – poems often tell me what *they* want to say, and all they require of *me* is to do their writing for them. I am principally a free verse poet, but I also write a lot of short form poetry – haiku and tanka, and more recently, *cherita* (a form devised by ai li around twenty-five years ago). In combination with those I also write haibun and tanka prose, and more recently responsive tanka with a like-minded friend.

Many of my poems are ekphrastic. Paintings, sculptures, music, theatre are among my many influences; if I visit a gallery I always take a note book knowing I will see at least one painting that will form the basis of a poem for me.

Did you have any formal training as a writer, or did you just get on with it?

No, I never had any formal training. In fact, I could be considered as someone who was least likely to become a poet, having failed both English Grammar and Literature at O levels. However, as I began to have more and more poems accepted for publication, it did occur to me that I ought to become involved with other poets in order to learn more of the craft from them. So, after taking early retirement from full time employment, and relocating to Felpham in West Sussex, I was really pleased that Slipstream Poets invited me to join them. Their regular workshops were very useful for me, and I learned much. Later I also joined Silk Road Writers and then Chichester Stanza group. About ten years ago I began reading regularly at the Chichester Open Mic – all very enjoyable and worthwhile. When a new group, River Poets, was formed in Arundel I became a member but, reluctantly, then had to let Silk Road go – I decided that there had to be a limit to the number of creative writing sessions one can attend each month.

Every group is different, and the dynamics are so varied. Every group for me is stimulating, and I regard these as continuous training on the job. In the past I also attended a week’s workshop on the Isle of Bute with Alan Carter who is dedicated to running *Quantum Leap* – one of the small magazines with a faithful following; and weekend workshops with Michael Laskey of *Smiths Knoll*, and Peter and Ann Sansom of *The North* – all excellent and worthwhile experiences.

There is something intriguing and paradoxical about the title of your first collection, *The Morning Light of Dusk* (2004). What was the collection about and how well-received was it?

At the time I was regularly contributing to *The Poetry Church* edited by John Waddington-Feather. The collection mainly consisted of my spiritually-based poems and published by John under his Feather Books imprint. Some of the poems would have been seen as unorthodox, and some were definitely influenced by Leslie Weatherhead's *The Christian Agnostic*. I compiled it for two reasons – in order to make contributions to good causes which I did, and also to establish it as a record of that era of my poetry knowing that my poems had already started to encompass a much broader range of subject matter. Having devoted much energy into church activities throughout the 80s and 90s, I made the positive decision when moving to West Sussex to redirect that energy instead into writing. I am now an irregular church attender.

***Turns Along the Garden Path* was published by Martin Holroyd's Poetry Monthly Press in 2007. Following Holroyd's retirement many of the titles published by the press also retired. Is *Turns Along the Garden Path* still in print? If not, are you going to re-issue it at some point in the future?**

Turns Along the Garden Path is no longer in print. In a way this collection became my statement of intent – it was essentially pagan in content as opposed to the more spiritual *The Morning Light of Dusk*: it marked the change in direction my poetry had already taken. In the late 1980s I had discovered the writings of Powys brothers (John Cowper, Llewelyn and Theodore) and had joined the Powys Society in the 1990s. All born into a Christian family (their father being a vicar), they each developed very individual standpoints regarding religion and ethics – all different, yet each in their own way convincing. I was allowing their writings to influence not only my writing but how I viewed the world.

I hadn't thought of re-issuing *Turns Along the Garden Path* – but if I ever get to the point of putting together a 'selected' collection then there are particular poems from it that I would definitely include.

You have now published six poetry collections in 16 years. What are the challenges you have faced writing these books?

The biggest challenge for each is deciding on its timing, and deciding to commit. It can be a fairly straightforward process to select poems for a collection, but the real effort then comes in revising many of them. I never regard a poem as finished even when it is first published – always I will spot something I wished I had changed. There is much fine-tuning to undertake, and then deciding on the order to ensure a collection flows naturally.

Each of my collections has been themed – my third collection *Letting the Road-Dust Settle* – consisted, in part, of reflections on my professional life. So, many of the poems were about the processes of road building (for better but often for the worse), and poems about characters I had worked with involved in the process. The collection then expanded to include poems about travel – both actual and fanciful.

Much of my and my wife's lives have been taken up with enjoying theatre and music. *Alchemy of Vision* which followed was a summing up of those years of enjoyment – the poems are about the visual and performing arts.

I was fortunate in having both collections accepted for publication by Indigo Dreams. The year 2017 marked the 25th anniversary of the acceptance of my first published poem and also the year I gave up on my novel *West Abutment Mirror Images*. Over the years I had often delved into my old manuscript to look for a phrase or scene to start a new poem. However, often what evolved had very little to do with the original plot, but became a poem in its own right. That whole collection is made up of such poems – the only exception being 'Notes for the Future' being central to the collection and also the pivotal scene in the original plot. This time I was pleased that Sam Smith undertook its publication under his Original Plus imprint, and grateful for the excellent editorial work he did.

What surprising things about yourself and humanity have you discovered from writing?

The most surprising thing was discovering how I needed to change my perspective on all kinds of issues as time has moved on. It is sensible to allow oneself to be educated by others, to make judgements according to what they say or do not say – accept that some people are actually better informed than one likes to think oneself is. I am more accepting of some things, others I am less accepting of. Then I surprise myself sometimes by what I actually write, how critical I can be when responding to so many of the disasters that are reported on the news, then once in while those happier events that really do happen. What a diverse race humans are: because our relationships and attitudes are influenced by so many variables, one has to learn tolerance, if nothing else.

On September 1, 2020 your new collection [Velocities and Drifts of Winds](#) was published by Dempsey and Windle. Tell us about this book, Geoffrey.

As I mentioned before, all my collections so far have been themed, and [Velocities and Drifts of Winds](#) follows in this tradition. The title really speaks for itself, the theme being 'the winds of change' – and this I have developed on various fronts. It consists of four sections, each opening with a tanka to set the tone, and starting with historic

events. Having become aware of the journals of Anthony à Wood through the writings of Llewlyn Powys, three of the poems about historic events are centred on extracts from those journals. Others are based on paintings and music and the environment. The second section focuses on physical things or events that can influence thought or conceptions; the third is essentially about changing relationships both with persons and situations; and the final section is about how personal relationships can become altered by the influences of other parties. In doing this I take a look back at some of those people who have played significant parts in my life. The overall sentiment of the collection can possibly be summed up by 'Clouds Gathering' – a tanka prose poem.

A mixture of free verse, tanka, haiku and cherita makes up the whole content, and several ekphrastic poems are included. Some examples of John Cowper Powys' influences are also there – in particular a poem titled 'Flesh' and another 'The City' – an ekphrastic poem which, at the time of writing, I happened upon his concept of a city being a mother – this changed the conclusion of the poem.

What are the plans for launching *Velocities and Drifts of Winds* in this time of Coronavirus?

I was most appreciative of the fact that Dempsey and Windle agreed to publish this collection, and they have provided me with a high quality product. Janice Dempsey was kind enough to offer me the facility of a Zoom launch, but this I graciously declined – when I read in public I do need to feel that my audience is really with me and that I am involving them.

My previous collections have not had formal launches as such but, for my last three, Barry Smith (Director of Chichester Poetry) has made room in the Open Mic programme for me to be the featured poet in order to give my collections their first public readings. I am hoping when things return to some kind of normality that Barry will offer me the same facility once more.

Thank you, Geoffrey, for giving me your time, and I wish you every success with *Velocities and Drifts of Winds*.

Thank you Nnorom for inviting me to be interviewed. It has been an interesting experience.

If I may be permitted, I would just like to take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude to various people who have played important roles in developing my poetic career. Whilst there have been scores of editors who have published my work, in order to be successful it has been necessary to find those editors of journals and magazines who have consistently supported my endeavours, and in this respect I would firstly like to mention Ronnie Goodyer and Dawn Bauling at Indigo Dreams –

Ronnie for the many poems of mine he has published in *Reach Poetry*, and Dawn who on three occasions has showcased my ekphrastic poetry in *Sarasvati*. Also Alan Carter at *Quantum Leap* – he has been a great supporter of mine over the years; then in America, M Kei has always shown his enthusiasm for my work and he has published much of my tanka production in *Atlas Poetica*. More recently ai li, who is sometimes in London and at other times in Singapore, has given me much support and encouragement. Another essential person to express my gratitude to is my wife, Janet. She all too often tolerates my ‘vague’ moods when I have lines or words for a poem trying to sort themselves out in my head! She has admirable understanding. **SLQ**

Notes for The Future

The throng of the afternoon park
converses with the sun –
standing, squatting, sitting –
grass patches all messed-up
with bedrolls, meths stoves,
ice cream, smoke then comes
the hum of human silence.

Josephine with her red headband
and Trish (a white rose in her hair)
kiss Daniel on the mouth
to the guitarist’s edgy opening riff
and the Hammond’s rotating bliss.

Drums and bass lay down the beat,
Nigel sings through a feedback shriek
and West Abutment are underway –
and they play, and play,
and play.

Trish rests her head on Josephine’s breast –
Daniel – eyes closed – strokes her back
until the guitarist decides to stop.
Drums and organ then fade away
while Nigel with a sigh
kisses the sky goodbye
and leaves the stage
for the bassist
to maintain the throb

of the afternoon's refrain
playing paper notes –

holding each

then setting it free to carry Trish,
Daniel and Josephine
into a higher ecstasy –
a heavenly dome of light and shade
where red, blue and yellow boxes
stand empty on a mirrored floor
waiting to be filled
with their tomorrows'
crystal balls

(First published by the QQ Press, 2009 and included in *Alchemy of Vision* and
West Abutment Mirror Images)

Clouds Gathering

Worst of these leisurely latter days are ones such as this when memories are delivered from out of the blue – reminders, for reasons never explained, that there have been too many partings-of-the-ways. Probably there were never any disputes or cross words exchanged; possibly no loves were unrequited; or addresses, phone numbers failed to be swapped – but only gradual fadings-away.

Friends, acquaintances, colleagues, cousins, or bright ships that passed-by too quickly on noteworthy nights – never a last goodbye or fare-thee-well, just never reconnecting other than in the mind or mind's eye.

as time drifts
on this autumn day
clouds
swiftly gather
in the twilit sky

(First published in *Contemporary Haibun Online*, 2020 and included in *Velocities and Drifts of Winds*)

The City

Fernand Léger: oil on canvas, 1919

She's industrious: knits warmth
with light, plasticises concrete
and steel, synthesises past
and future – electricity
is alive inside her.

Her central avenue is the key to
her tempo, regulating distances
between corners, boundaries
and measured squares.

Her façades rich with shape and colour –
hard lines of authority; softer lines
curved for seekers of peace.

Her towers do not thrust with violence,
yet are substructures bolder than
her half-hidden signs.

She is a mother city – her children
conform to ritual, they follow her
walkways that always lead to purpose –
hers is a busy life deep within her heart.

She's a function of her philosophy:
love her
or learn to love her desire for tranquillity
and kinship will prevail.

(First published in *Sarasvati*, 2015 and included in *Velocities and Drifts of Winds*)

Chesterton Windmill

our small family would Sunday-trek
to the lane, ascend the field-path to
view through the mill's open portals
the Dasset and Edge Hills

listen to skylarks trilling while
the Fosse Way's traffic hummed below –

and once, with other celebrants, we watched
and felt its sails rumble-turning, heard
its machinery creak
all decades ago

now in remoteness
I need to stand again
on its knee-high plinth, wander through
those high-arched portals, feel
its limestone coolness

and offer myself once more
to a strengthening southerly wind
that would have driven its engine with purpose

be reminded of those words
those winds carried to me

aquilae corn
phantoms bendigo
 murder
 blue lias
 silos

*(Chesterton Windmill in Warwickshire is the earliest tower mill in England (1633)
to retain any of its working parts.)*

*(First published in *Poetry and All that Jazz*, 2020)*