

BARBER



HOME



OVERHEAR

JACQUI
ROWE

in partnership with
Overhear

Our collection, your place

JACQUI ROWE

Jacqui Rowe has facilitated creative writing workshops at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts since 2013 after being our Writer in Residence in 2013-2014.

Her sixth book, *Other Things I Didn't Used To Know*, a collection of poems which address her experience of Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia, was joint winner of the Indigo Dreams Collection Competition, and will be published by Indigo Dreams later this year. She also has poems in two anthologies, *Places for Poetry* and *Beyond the Storm – poems from the Covid-19 era*, both coming out later in 2020. She has worked as a writer in schools and in health and social care settings. Co-editor of the award-winning Flarestack Poets press, she is also a tutor for the Poetry School. Since 2014 she has had a place on Writing West Midlands' Room 204 writer development scheme.

In this Barber Home resource you will find new and existing original writing by Jacqui, inspired by her time spent in the Barber galleries. Jacqui also shares suggested activities you can try at home, using paintings found in the Barber's collection.

The below Q&A with Flora Kay, Learning & Engagement Manager, that took place in July 2020 frames Jacqui's experience, opening up the familiar and intimate relationship she has with these works of art and the motivations behind her writing practice.

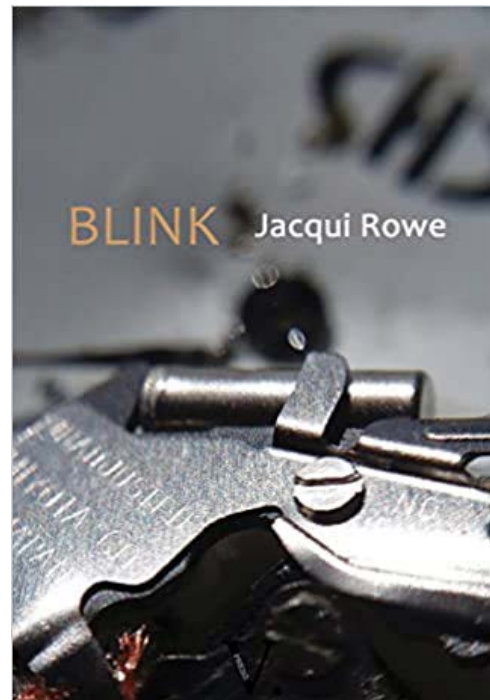
This collaboration between the Barber Institute and Overhear materialised from local Cultural Central meeting over the Covid-19 pandemic and how arts organisations are adapting to working remotely with artists and creatives. Tom, Overhear's Founder, pitched the use of Overhear for socially distant poetry collection and from this the Barber Institute contacted Tom to feature Overhear for Barber at Home.

This was a nice continued the relationship with resident poet Jacqui Rowe who featured on Overhear Birmingham Literature Festival Map back in October.

You can listen to Jacqui reading a sample of these on location with the Overhear app (see page 10 for more information.).

Q: Can you tell us briefly about your experience of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts?

A: I was Writer in Residence in 2013-14, though I'd known and loved the Barber for a long time before that. I established the creative writing sessions, which I still teach. At these monthly Saturday afternoon workshops there is always a mix of people who've been coming regularly for years and some who just drop in occasionally. I've written about works in the Barber throughout and a number of those poems appeared in my last book, *Blink*.



Q: Why did you choose to respond to these particular pieces in the collection for this edition of Barber Home?

A: I wanted to use images of the collection on the Barber website and as I scrolled through I found myself attracted to some of the works that have been popular subjects on my workshops. I've always tended to write about less obvious pieces but somehow, missing the Barber and the camaraderie of our Saturday afternoons, I found comfort in writing about the more familiar works. I actually knew the ones I chose so well that I could visualise where they hang in the galleries.

Q: What are you hoping someone experiencing these creative writing exercises will take away?

A: If nothing else, a piece of writing. Even if they're not happy with what they've written, at least they have something they can work on. If they're not used to writing, I hope it might encourage them to try more. I hope the exercises make them want to engage with the works in the collection and to use the website as a resource, but also to come and look at the real works when they're able to again.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about the process of making these new pieces of work?

A: I was trying out the writing exercises I was setting, which I always tend to do, to create examples and to check that the exercises work. I enjoyed doing the Dribbles – a form I first came across during lockdown – because I like using constraints. Our imaginations work overtime if our brains are told we must or must not do something, so writing exactly 50 words was like a puzzle. The decisions you make in order to follow the rules often lead to better results than if you'd been free to write anything. I love The Wrath of Ahasuerus but I've never written about it. It was fun to create the beginning of the monologue, as an example for that exercise, from the point of view of the servant pouring wine, a character that fascinates me. I always come back to haiku as a basic unit of poetry, which again uses constraints. In 2013 I wrote 80 haiku in six hours to mark the Barber's 80th birthday, and last year I wrote a haiku every day, which are on my blog – 17haiku.wordpress.com



Q: Do you think you may have approached your responses differently having not just experienced lockdown?

A: I would almost certainly have chosen different, possibly more challenging, works for my examples. I notice that as well as being familiar, the ones I picked tend to be about relationships- parents and children, lovers. They're set in the real world, too, not fantasy, figurative or abstract.

EXERCISES AND EXAMPLES

Creative writing about art is called *ekphrasis*. To Jacqui, ekphrasis means creating a piece of writing that is an artwork in itself. All of these exercises use paintings from the Barber's collections, which you can find on the Barber website, as the source of inspiration.

A DRIBBLE

A Dribble is a piece of writing that's exactly 50 words long, not 49, not 51 but 50 exactly. It's particularly good for stories, but it's also easy to turn it into a poem.

Choose a painting from the Barber website, preferably one that tells a story, or has a lot going on in it. Restricting yourself to 50 words means you have to be economical. Concentrate on the story and don't use up your words writing lengthy descriptions. So that you don't spend a long time repeatedly counting your words, it's a good idea to make a 50-word grid to add your words. Just count the words, not punctuation or spaces. The title is extra to your 50 words so it can be as long as you like.

Look at the picture you have chosen. What led up to this moment? What's going to happen afterwards? Try writing in the voice of one of the characters. Or think about the painter and how the painting came to be made. If you don't have exactly 50 words, use your imagination and ingenuity to think of different ways of saying something. You might find that words you chose because they fit are better than the ones you first thought of.

When you're happy with your Dribble, you can keep it as it is, a prose story, or change it into a poem by setting it out on lines, as I have for two of mine. Decide whether it makes more sense with long or short lines or a mixture of both. Don't be afraid to change some words or move them round.

What else you can do?

There's no rule that the Dribble has to stay a Dribble. What's important is that you've written something and now you can do what you like with it. It might be the first paragraph of a longer story or the first verse of a poem. Even if you're not happy with what you've written, don't throw it away!

There are always a few lines or even a couple of words that you can salvage. Read through your Dribble and underline two or three words or phrases that you really like. What do those words make you think of? Perhaps they could be the beginning or the ending of a new piece, which might have nothing to do with the painting you started off with. This is a process you can use with any drafts you're not sure what to do with.

A MONOLOGUE

In a monologue, a single character talks throughout a poem or a story. Alan Bennett's *Talking Heads*, which were recently screened on BBC1, are good examples.

Choose a character from one of the paintings on the Barber website, a portrait perhaps, or one of many characters in a scene. It's interesting to look at a picture from the point of view of a person who seems insignificant. Get to know your character by asking them some questions about themselves, such as:

- Do you have brothers and sisters?
- What do you do really well?
- What would your best friend say about you?
- What would your worst enemy say about you?
- What did you do as a child that you are still ashamed of?
- Do you like looking at yourself in a mirror?
- What is your secret wish?
- What is your greatest fear?

(Make up some more of your own if you want to).

Try looking at the character for a while before you start asking the questions, and when you do, write down whatever comes into your mind. Imagine the character's voice as they answer.

Now, decide whether the character is talking to someone else — if so, who? — or if this is an internal monologue going on in the character's mind.

Finally, what are they going to talk about? If there's a lot going on in the picture, you might want to have them talk about that. If there are no clues, for example, if it's a portrait of a single sitter, have them talk about something that has gone wrong. Stories tend to be based on conflict, so a reader is more likely to be engaged by adversity than by someone having a lovely day. You don't have to bring in everything you learnt from asking questions, they were to help you get to know your character, but sometimes one of the answers can lead to a story in itself.

Monologues most often appear in fiction and drama but they can make effective poems. Have a look at dramatic monologues by Robert Browning, including *My Last Duchess*, and Carol Ann Duffy's book, *The World's Wife*.

Your finished monologue could be a story or a poem in itself, or you could make it part of something longer. Authors sometimes write monologues to get to know their characters before they write a story or novel.

Jan Steen, *The Wrath of Ahasuerus*, 1671-3

(Told by the figure pouring wine)

Content warning: paintings with imagery of slavery

As soon as I saw the peacock pie I was scared. It lay precariously on the edge of the table, pastry moulded into the shape of a bird, almost to the floor. I could easily have knocked it down as I passed, serving wine. I remembered with a shudder how I had ruined my sister's wedding cake when I was eight, demolishing it as I reached past for ripe cherries. For that, I just got a slap. Here, I'd lose my job at court and I couldn't afford that. As I filled the goblets I wondered why the food was so grand, fit for a banquet, when only three people were present, the king, dressed in his finest, my lord Haman, smug as ever, and the queen, looking nervous...



WRITING THE SENSES

Pictures are purely visual, yet when we look at them, they often evoke sounds, smells, feelings, even taste. Writers try to help readers enter the world of their poem or story by describing not just what it looks like but how the readers' other senses would respond if they were there.

Before you begin writing about a painting, take in the environment you're in yourself for a few minutes. Think about one thing you can smell, one thing you can hear, one thing you can touch and, if possible, one thing you can taste. Now choose a painting from the website, imagine you're in it, and go through the senses, writing down what you would perceive for each.

Either, write a paragraph of prose setting the scene by describing sensory experiences other than sight, or write one or more haiku about the scene, concentrating on senses other than the visual. A haiku is a short poem consisting of three lines as follows:

5 syllables

7 syllables

5 syllables

(When you count syllables, count them as you say them yourself. For example, in one of the haiku above I count 'cornflowers' as two syllables because that's how I say it, but some people would say it as three.)

You could write a series of haiku about a painting, each concentrating on a different sense, or choose one sense, eg smell, and go through a number of paintings, writing a series of haiku about the smells you detect in each.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blue Bower*, 1865

Duller than bells, to
his ear, but when her fingers
fly, how the strings chime.

That scent she wears, musk
he thinks. It drowns the earthy,
peppery cornflowers.

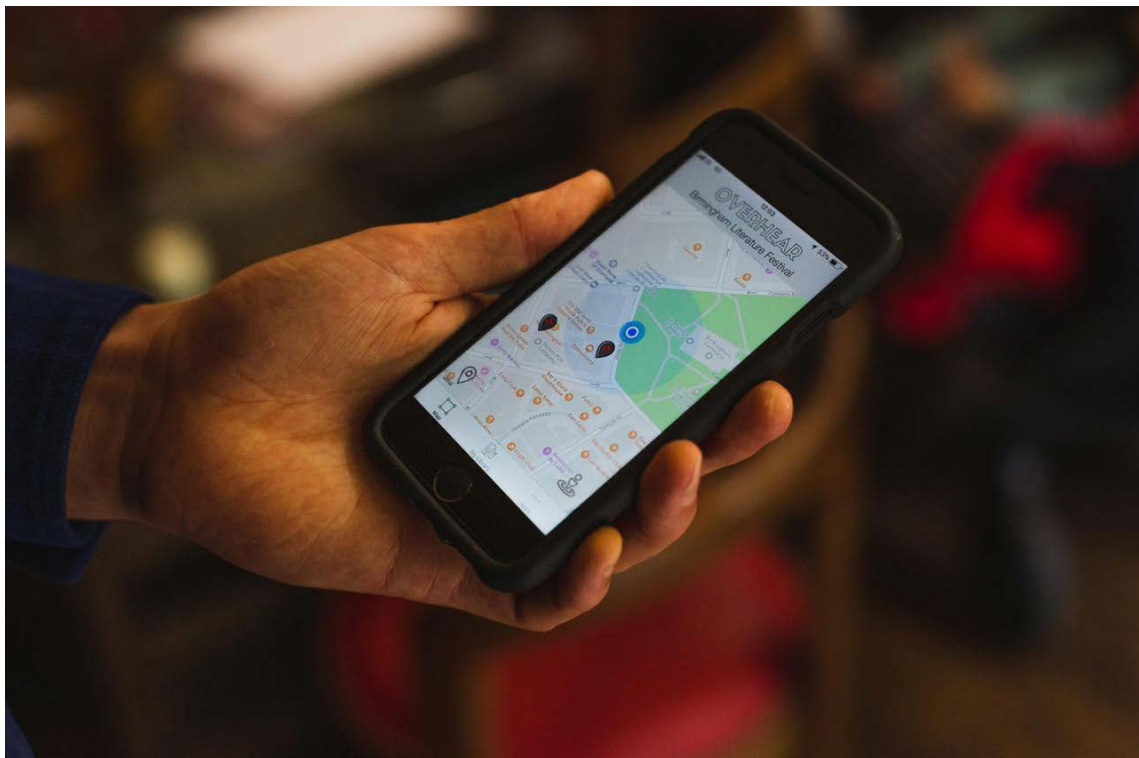


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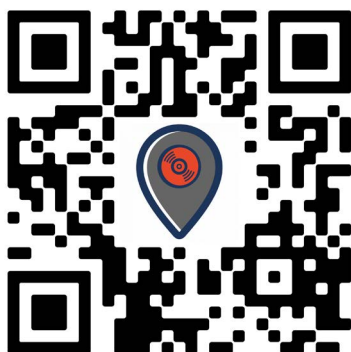
Overhear records and geotags creative audio content to locations in the physical world via its mobile app putting poetry on the map, literally.

Working with local writers and local spaces, we pin specially commissioned poems to the locations they're inspired by. This 'augmenting' of space with poetry brings you a new perspective on your location to enjoy.

Download our app (available for free on Apple and Android devices), visit the venues and listen to the recorded poems. When you open the app, simply choose the Barber Institute map and head to the nearest pin. When you're there, tap the 'Collect' pop-up to add the pinned piece to your library of collected recordings and enjoy! You can find more information about Overhear including our events, poets and writers' forum at www.theoverhear.app



Scan here to download the app



SCHOOL TRIP

Flat shoes, black tights, they group
in chiaroscuro, dark hair, light
to peer at characters from Christmas plays
at primary school, angels, Mary, kings,
peace shaped like a dove and memories
of cattle lowing, of taking wooden creatures
to the crib. They venture unvoiced names
of half-forgotten saints, propose the origin of paint
in earth and rock, soft-spoken as their diffident,
unsqueaky soles. Like gossips rendered speechless
by the death of Isaac and his son's
duplicity, they are motionless as lives
of broken instruments, discarded scores, still
enough for dust, in uniform and unadorned,
blue tops, black skirts, are being schooled in vanitas.
Poised, with feet in first and third, some tendue,
set as bronze, they stand before Vesuvius, know
the dark clarity of water, how it absorbs
the revolutionary sky, and as
they turn away, the chatter starts.

Jacopo Da Ponte (called Bassano), *Adoration of the Magi*, 1560's

Unaware of symbols, broken columns
for an early death, the Magi
have brought the party with them. One
turns to joke, sends his page
to fetch the feast. Twelve days
old and wrinkled, tufty haired,
the baby is preoccupied, questing
for the source of milk, would not recognise
if his eyes could sharpen them against
the bleak hillside, the stake bisected
by the branch. Not one of them there,
the mother, husband, servants, kings,
the dogs anticipating leavings, will be less
unhappy ever than today. On all fours,
the oldest of the three coos
like a grandfather, has cast aside
his crown, his gift, become, with the child,
a man. Cross-backed, an ass ignores
discarded gold, grubs in the dirt and weeds.

Peter Paul Rubens, *A Landscape in Flanders*, 1635-40

A knight in two languages, he has left behind his blowsy goddesses, sumptuous pigments, the silks and brocade, left them for this view across woods and pastures, the reason he bought the castle. Here, the weather shifts before his eyes and he has at last learnt to paint the rain.



Sebastiano and Marco Ricci, *Allegorical Tomb of the First Duke of Devonshire*, 1725

look don't look look
look don't look
look don't stop don't gaze
don't close your eyes
don't turn your glance from the glass
don't primp your anguished hair
 don't stare
don't stop to reflect
that your name and your time aren't there
in the vacant cartouche don't peer
head first down that hole the worms
have gnawed avoid in the void
like snakes in the grass despair
unclasp the box make soup from stone
stir pigment into flesh
and pause don't pause
be prey to claws of angels
turn grizzled grisaille grey
stay don't stay don't play
toggle quick to extinct and flick it back
blink don't think
 think don't blink

Nicholas Lancret, *Lovers in a Landscape (The Turtle Doves)*, 1736

A prettying of doves, he tells her, a pitying of doves, a dule of turtle doves. Why so? she asks.

For the sadness of their widow's sobs. From then on the afternoon is lost to her, the pattering leaves, the murmur of the brook drowned by the lamentations of birds.

Etienne Aubry, *Paternal Love*, 1775

Rumpetty tum,
I play on my drum,
that Grandpa brought today.
Rattatt tat,
'Don't wake the cat!'
Mama would usually say.
But Papa's come home from the war,
to Mama, my brothers and me.
We're all together once more.
Clickety clack,
Papa is back,
and we're having rabbit for tea.

Pierre - Auguste Renoir, *A Young Woman Seated*, 1876-7

She knows she is a film. Her hair
is spun from chintz. She is fading
into cushions, grows out of upholstery
where someone has split paint like flowers.
M Renoir is he still here?
Her hands are jelly, fingers melting into lips.
Blue, seen through a pool, her face
brightens from the softness of deep water.
Was it he who brought the rose?
Waking is long, long-drawn
waking to the insight of the house,
thoughts scratching at the path,
practice on a far off violin,
piano chords ill-formed
and incidental, music of a car
that fails to start, trees falling to the saw,
crackle on the line, on the ridge
a motorcycle grinds, outside of her
the future.

Johan Christian Dahl, *A Mother and Child by the Sea*, 1840

My mother puts a coat on me
as the sun goes down.
We reach the shore at moonrise, when
pink clouds are stretched
along the horizon.
Where sky meets the white sea
there is a fishing boat, bending
against the breeze.
We watch it sail past.
We watch every night.



Edgar Degas, *Grande Arabesque Third Time*, 1885-90

Malleable as wax,
a dancer's body, bent
in different planes
a windmill, leaves
of grass, a saltire,
swift. Or is she bowling,
skating, animated in the pages
of a flicker book?
He left her mutable,
as unfixed as the third beat
of an arabesque,
the pose ephemeral
on her the grasp
of bronze like mercury.

Rene Magritte, *The Flavour of Tears*, 1948

Father, the sky was blue and natural
but now it is painted on a curtain.
The evangelist was an eagle
and I a hero in a cape.
My face is a man's face.
But oh they punctuate my chest
and their points have the qualities of
shadows.
I am succulent as leaves,
they rise around me,
fingers of the lotus,
caterpillar eating me.
Mother, my breast is full of holes.
Tell me how I should love my predator,
meat for me were I not for him.
Listen to the squeal of birds
that flood my lonely exile on this island,
the leathery shriek of plants,
how someone drones
outside this frame, Lord
another greater god.