



Peter Bakowski

NEW COMMISSION

The Burgess & Manchester Poems

Peter Bakowski is a poet and library lover based in Melbourne City of Literature. He has been writing poetry for 40 years and has published many collections including *Our Ways on Earth*, *Waldo's Game* and *On Luck Street*. His poems have been translated into many languages and he prides himself on writing clear, accessible poems, using ordinary words to say extraordinary things. He has been Writer-in-Residence in Rome, Paris, Macau, Suzhou (China), Greenmount (Western Australia), Battery Point (Tasmania) and Broken Hill (New South Wales). An avid music lover, Peter has presented jazz programmes on Melbourne radio stations 3RRR and 3CR and used to run his own influential record shop Exposure Records.

In Spring 2022, Peter Bakowski was appointed the first Virtual Writer in Residence at the International Anthony Burgess Foundation by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester UNESCO City of Literature for the second Festival of Libraries. As part of his residency, he was commissioned to create a new series of portrait poems exploring the interplay of words and music, wit and performance in the creative life of Anthony Burgess and other Manchester creatives.

Peter discussed his residency and 'The Burgess & Manchester Poems' in an Instagram Q&A for Manchester Literature Festival with local writer and host Kate Feld on 9 December 2022.

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About The Burgess & Manchester Poems

I came to the Virtual Residency with no personal experience of visiting or living in Manchester and prior to the Virtual Residency having only read *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess but I was attracted to the challenge of researching a prolific, varied and widely travelled writer such as Anthony Burgess who was also a largely self-taught pianist and composer. My goal was to turn my incomplete knowledge of Anthony Burgess and Manchester into something wider and deeper, insightful or intriguing.

My policy during the Virtual Residency was one of immersion — to educate myself regarding Anthony Burgess, Manchester and Manchester creatives. I began by reading the two volumes of autobiography written by Anthony Burgess, *Little Wilson and Big God* and *You've Had Your Time*. In them, Burgess reveals himself as bravely candid but also as an embellisher and fabricator, enjoying the licence which many writers use, to mix fact and fiction, for their own, and the reader's entertainment. From reading the autobiographies I became aware of the abiding personal and creative concerns, the ongoing investigations of Anthony Burgess.

I balanced and cross-referenced the material in the autobiographies by then reading the biography of Anthony Burgess by Andrew Biswell, tellingly titled *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* which I nicknamed "The Bible". The biography helped me underline key moments in Burgess's life, provided me with an emotional and vocational map of the restless but driven Anthony Burgess.

On a series of index cards I wrote out the details of numerous footnotes laced throughout *The Real Life of Anthony Burgess* which named and dated Burgess media interviews and travel, literary and personal self-examining articles Burgess wrote. Via email and Zoom meetings, I started digitally requesting these interviews and articles from the International Anthony Burgess Foundation. I read or listened to each provided interview several times. It was invaluable to my portraiture of Burgess to hear his voice, the sense of him being more open than defensive. I was struck by Burgess's inquiring mind, his great curiosity, how I sensed his self-assurance but at the same time also his humility and self-deprecation.

Supplementary to the interviews and articles digitally provided, I requested from the International Anthony Burgess Foundation to view all the Burgess-related photos they hold and a complete listing of Anthony Burgess's record and cassette collection.

I found the photos a great help. They gave me a deeper sense of Anthony Burgess as a committed participatory teacher in England, Malaya and Brunei, convivial and social on a bar stool, in a pub or expounding an opinion or philosophy from a sofa, armchair or cane chair in accommodation provided or found in England, Malaya, Brunei and Italy. From the photographs I also got the sense of Anthony Burgess as a belated father, largely affectionate and playful, but also having his patience and tolerance tested by his young son. And importantly I got the sense of Burgess at his ever-portable typewriter pounding the keys, getting the sound, flow and intent of a phrase, a paragraph or a page just right.

Noting a Noël Coward recording in Anthony Burgess's record collection, I acquired a compact disc titled *Noël Coward Sings Noël Coward*. With Coward's songs I could see a 'brotherhood' with Burgess's own verbal and written dexterity, the legacy of the music-hall era and that it's far from a crime to be an entertaining writer, pointing out and lampooning human follies, mannerisms and ways. Reading the Burgess novels, *The Doctor Is Sick*, *One Hand Clapping*, *Time For A Tiger*, *The Enemy in The Blanket* and *Beds in The East*, I was struck by Burgess's ability to deftly balance the

comedic against the tragic, to show the often-shambolic nature of institutions, such as hospitals, colleges, government, military and colonial bureaucracies and their staff.

Via Burgess's journalistic and book-writing practice, evident in the material I accessed, I became increasingly aware of Burgess's sense of diligence driven by practical fee-earning deadlines but significantly by his heightened awareness of time and mortality. Burgess's diligence "against the clock" was a crafted range of output, a creative defence and defiance against the too early deaths of his mother, sister, father, fellow soldiers in WWII, his first wife Lynne, and his own 'health scare' — a brain tumour, misdiagnosed in 1959.

My non-Burgess Manchester-related poems were realised via watching the film, based on Martyn Hesford's play, *Mrs Lowry & Son*; the Ken Loach films, *Looking For Eric* and *Raining Stones*; the Shelagh Delaney play *A Taste of Honey*, and listening to the studio recordings of GoGo Penguin.

The 2022 Virtual Residency, the wealth of material the International Anthony Burgess Foundation provided, the thinking and crafting that material inspired, enabled me to write poems I couldn't have written without the experience of the residency.

Immeasurable thanks to the patient, punctual and generous Ivan Wadeson, Andrew Biswell, Will Carr & Sarah-Jane Roberts.

Peter Bakowski

Portrait of Elizabeth and L.S. Lowry, 1930

Mother rings the bedside bell.
She is cold or hot,
there's an ache.
The wind has dislodged a dustbin lid.
The clatter hurts.
How well she once played the piano.
There were numerous admirers...

I bring the glass of water to her lips,
sit by the bed.
At last, she's asleep.

In the attic
I remove the cloth from the canvas,
paint in more figures—
workers streaming from the mill.
Many on foot. Save the bus fare.

On my daily rounds, collecting rent,
I encounter children, dirt-anointed, in need of shoes.
I dig for the coin of a smile,
sometimes take too long
and they're off to chase a cat.

I walk and look, walk and look,
draw in my sketchpad
the small adventure of a face.

And home again,
I hang my coat in the hallway,
check on mother,
enquire about her bedridden day,
tell her that we'll be having
sausages for tea, with mash.

Anthony and Lynne Burgess in Kuala Kangsar, Malaya, 1954

In this perspiring state
where ceiling fans and colonial officers
falter or desist in expected function,
I declaim Shakespeare sonnets
to fidgety schoolboys,

their fee-paying fathers busy
with the extraction
of tin, rubber, foreign dollars,
with the importation of automobiles,
refrigerators, dental chairs.
Sons may dip a toe in the waters of art
but never fully immerse.

Made of gin and limes, my wife
lies upstairs in the shuttered afternoons,
as below, the garden seethes with snakes.
Ibrahim, the chain-smoking cook,
slumps in a cane chair outside the kitchen,
on his apron is spilled cigarette ash.
At least once a month
an insect part—jewelled wing or thorny leg,
is discovered in one's bowl of rice.

A sorcerer sticks wooden pins
through the forehead of an effigy
and in a warehouse by the river
a merchant topples from his swivel chair.

The ghosts are watching.

A scorpion crawls towards the open mouth
of Police-Lieutenant Keir, far from Glasgow,
and asleep beneath a banyan tree.

At the Drainage and Irrigation Department end of year party, Kota Bharu, Malaya, 1955

She gave her name as Cherry.
And the fate of her two husbands
is still debated in Cantonese
among the servants.

The Dutch-built villa on the hill
is only part of the inheritance. There are
as well, hefty dividends
from tin mines and rubber plantations.
The plurality of them, a comfort.

Tonight Cherry has her eye on a tall one
in a linen suit of pale blue,
his eyes now on the punchbowl.
Rupert...something.
She finds Western names difficult to pronounce,
especially if they contain an “r” or “q”.

Cherry snakes her way to the drinks table.
“You must be...Rupert?”

“Yes, I am. Of course, I’ve heard of you.
No, I’m yet to acquire a car.
Seeing the jungle temple? That would be grand.
6 a.m..? Yes, the sun. Of course.
Unfortunately, I must go now. A report to write.
See you in the morning. You’ve made the evening pleasant.”

This Rupert would be easy. Not so young as to be scandalous—
but young. Willem, her last husband, was old from the beginning,
vigorous on the dancefloor, but nowhere else.

Manchester 1956

Rows of houses. Solid red brick.

Excrement on a welcome mat—a new type of chess move.

Lads will be lads, whether Protestant or Catholic.

A turf war to end turf wars—sends mothers church bound,
to pray harder for their unemployed men, pregnant daughters.

New sounds on the radio. Lonnie Donegan. Bill Haley & His Comets.

Idle hands cadge cigarettes. Another skint Saturday night.

Sit and fume on the cold steps of the post office.

There's more to be got out of the weekend than
half pints and darts. Walk past Mays Pawnbrokers.

Musical instruments displayed in the window.

Troubles sorted once you can play guitar.

Learn some chords. Practise in the mirror. Shake up the town.

Portrait of Enderby

Keeping up appearances,
dressing for the postman
who has a letter for Vesta.
There's no forwarding distress.

Over cups of tea for one
you imagine her,
supine in Saint-Tropez—
a wide bed,
panoramic sea view,
not a poet in sight,
slim males for the picking,
speedboats handy,
and ready flights to Paris,
where no café patron
would suffer porridge for breakfast.

The trains of thought have been cancelled
and it's cold in this waiting room...
The mirror knows better
and reflects you sitting on the toilet.
At least you're not constipated...
in fact, you have an idea for a poem.

Portrait of Anthony Burgess, Trastevere, 1971

I type a character into being—thirsty, talkative,
a composer of music, verse, excuses,
not always applaudable.
I'm not sure whether he's hapless or heroic...

And pause. Get up from my desk.
I'll leave my character to ponder
his attitude and attire,
whether he has free will...

I look out the window.
A group of teenagers,
elaborate with their hair,
practise their slouching.
A few have motor scooters.
One polishes a side mirror
with his shirt cuff.
Perhaps they're waiting
for more exciting
versions of themselves.

They can wait. There are publication deadlines.
Pressure is good—turns coal into diamonds. Maybe.
Each working day I excavate to the depth
of one or two thousand words.
This is my vocation and my failing—
distracted, oblivious to the needs of others.

Liana can't find her passport.
Andrea is busy burying marbles in the cat litter.

Small episodes of domestic chaos.
I file them away for future use.
An autobiography isn't out of the question.

Maximilian Starr, former booking agent, BBC interview, 1985

Mickie And His Marvellous Mice.
Before talkies they were my biggest act.

Hector, the lead mouse, rode out on a miniature tricycle
from behind red velvet curtains,
followed by Gwendoline, the smallest of the troupe,
doing cartwheel after cartwheel,
then came the rest,
jumping through positioned hoops...

I had bookings all over the north,
months in advance,
including a tour of Ireland.

Mickie, their owner and trainer—
no journalist could trace his origins.
He looked Romany but could have been Italian
but then maybe not—never looked at a woman...

When Hector died,
we got letters and telegrams of condolence,
anecdotes: lives changed by mice—
gloomy aunts unfrozen, seen to smile in the High Street...

I became a tobacconist then, here in Manchester.
Don't smoke myself. A good thing.
W.D. and H.O. Wills never did either,
the brothers.
Splurge when I go to Vienna each year.
Chocolates and opera. They're my indulgent pleasures
as I approach ninety,
the last leaf on the family tree.

Anthony Burgess talks about his two volumes of autobiography

At times in my life
I've found it attractive
to leave the British Isles.

Amongst apes, army personnel, petty bureaucrats and criminals
in Gibraltar, Malaya, Brunei, Malta, Italy, the Americas,
I learned a little or too much regarding
religion, sex, the world's languages, good and evil,
the Englishness in myself and others.

Adventures and misadventures, their embellishment and fabrication
became books, not best-sellers, but each a stepping stone
to a reputation questioned, sometimes rubbished in the national press
and petulant literary journals.

A demanding subject—the self—a swamp of blood and organs.
The surgeon's scalpel, more lethal than a rudder,
wants to make its way upstream,
to where the intellect resides.
Outside that cave, restless to dissect,
are numerous cannibals and critics.

Meanwhile I hit the typewriter keys,
play hide and seek amongst nouns, verbs, adjectives,
cigarette smoke and ice cubes,
aware of another deadline.

A Salford lad talks to a visiting Londoner

Got a curry not a girlfriend.
Went to junk college. So did friends.
I visit them in the cemetery—
know all the bus routes there.

Here comes a gang—
made of chip fat and bad tattoos.
They'll cut your bookworm face.

Freddie and the Dreamers—
I've got all their records.
What comes out of my mouth is snake hiss.

Stick your nose in your overpriced coffee
and go back to what you know.

Listening to GoGo Penguin

The drums run for a train.
Foot-stamping cold on the platform.
Look out over the city. Office blocks. Church spires.
The pulsing lights on an ambulance. Perhaps too late.

A barge bumps against rubber tyres bolted to the canal wall.
The bass has gone out to sea, pursues a craft,
may overtake it.

Piano. Hungry fingers. Tunes torn in half. Leave the bones behind.
If an admirer asks—excavate and tinkle is what you do.
Walk home from the gig. Think about what went right and wrong.

A gull pecks at a fish-head.
The drums are loaded into the back of the van.
Phil, the roadie, looking forward to a shower.

ABBA ABBA, chiselled on the gravestone of Anthony Burgess

Already a bookish boy
Bullied but not broken.
British Army—brass band arrangements quite
Accomplished.

Adroitly engaged in the critiquing and writing of books,
Bold excavation of our failed Edens—none found in the
Bottom of a glass. Characters stride out from the
Avalanche of words to greet us, imagine us into being.